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FAILURE FRAME

I BECAME THE STRONGEST AND **ANNIHILATED EVERYTHING**

WITH LOW-LEVEL SPELLS

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SERAS ASHRAIN

"THE RUNAWAY"

MIMORI TOUKA



SOGOU AYAKA

KIRIHARA TAKUTO

KASHIMA KOBATO

VICIUS



A girl stood bathing, completely naked, knee-deep in the river. The sun shone down on her through the trees, making her silken, milky white skin sparkle. She was thin, but not too thin, and her long white-blond hair was damp and clung to her round, voluptuous breasts. She gently pulled it back and tucked it behind an ear.

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Seven Seas Entertainment

HAZURE WAKU NO [JOUTAI IJOU SUKIRU] DE SAIKYOU NI NATTA ORE
GA SUBETE WO JUURIN SURU MADE VOL. 1

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Illustrations by KWKM

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Prologue

WE WERE ON A SCHOOL TRIP when it happened.

All of Okito Academy's class 2-C was packed on a bus that wound its way through the mountains. Some were asleep, others played with their smartphones, some stared at themselves in little makeup mirrors or just sat there looking carsick. But the ones who stood out most were all together at the back of the bus.

"The Elites," you could call them.

"Hey Takuto, introduce me to one of your girls some time, yeah?"

"You play too loose with them, Shougo. Don't lie so often, and I'll think about it."

That was Kirihara Takuto. They say God doesn't give with both hands, but this guy was handsome, charismatic, and good at everything he tried—top stats across the board. He was the sun our whole class revolved around. One word from him, and even the air would sit up and pay attention.

"Kirihara-kun, you're such a good guy!" a few girls squealed in response.

If Kirihara Takuto was class 2-C's main character, then Oyamada Shougo was his loyal sidekick. Standing by Kirihara's side at all times, Oyamada was the delinquent yin to the golden boy's yang, and his self-proclaimed best friend. He had a rough face and a reputation for making trouble. The only positive things you could say about the guy were that he had a good physique and knew his way around a fight. If you were ranking people on how generally unpleasant they were, he'd be near the top of the list.

The Kirihara and Oyamada duo ruled over all the popular kids in class.

"Why don't you ever, like, go for any of us, Shougo?" one of the girls asked.

"You're all too easy!" Oyamada replied.

"Aw, c'mon," she sighed.

"If you're gonna be flashy, you gotta at least beat the younger Takao sister!"

"Whoa, no way, are you kidding me?! She's, like, barely even human! How do you expect a regular girl to compete with *that*?!"

"Heh, I guess you don't have much to work with, huh? She was born with a hundred-mile head start on you there!" Oyamada taunted, clearly enjoying himself. He seemed more amped up than usual—must've been because of the school trip.

The girl he'd been talking about, on the other hand, sat quietly. The Takao sisters, a pair of twins who always stuck together, were famously weird. The older, Takao Hijiri, was a poised, impeccable beauty, while her younger sister, Takao Itsuki, was much flashier and more outgoing. They were another impressive, high-stat pair—Hijiri was the second smartest person in class, and Itsuki came in fourth on our last test, too. They were both athletic, with figures to match, and their beauty blew the rest of the class out of the water.

As long as you can ignore how weird they are, I thought.

"This view of the mountains could be a window to expand your imagination in extraordinary directions. Take a good look out there, Itsuki," said Hijiri.

"I see it, Aneki," her sister replied.

No matter how long I looked out the window, it all just looked normal to me.

Is there actually anything extraordinary out there? Can the Takao twins really see something I can't?

Or maybe just Hijiri...I don't think I've ever heard Itsuki disagree with her.

"Whoa! I said her name, and she didn't even blink! Totally ignored! Oh man, she's so cool!" Oyamada said excitedly.

"Could you be a little quieter back there, Oyamada-kun?" a clear voice rang out through the bus.

"Huh?"

"I'm trying to read."

That was Sogou Ayaka, our class leader. Black hair with a headband, a pale complexion, pristine black tights—she was so good-

looking that rumors had even spread about her at other schools, as had a few long shot photos passed around on instant messenger.

Rumor had it she was from a super rich family—an expensive car stopped at the gates every day to pick her up after school. She was trained in martial arts, and her academic skills put her at the top of the class. She wasn't in a club, though she showed her athleticism in gym class—she'd even sub in sometimes at sports club tournaments when they needed her.

If Kiri-hara Takuto was the male protagonist of this story, Sogou Ayaka was the female lead.

“Whatcha reading, Sogou?” Oyamada taunted as he snatched the book away from her. “Still reading paper books nowadays—this a manga, or what? Oh, hey, a novel.” Nobody stopped him, of course—there weren't many people in class 2-C even capable of talking back to him. He tore off the book cover to see what was underneath.

That idiot always goes too far...

“Give it back,” Sogou shot at him.

“The most incredible love story you'll read this year'...?! Ooh, I gotta check this out!”

“I-I said, give it back!”

“Are you kidding me? Our number one student reads this kinda junk? Underneath it all, Ayaka-tan, you're just a sweet little girl who reads romance novels!”

“S-so what?!”

“Ugh, so many freaking words! I could never get through this...my eyes...they're falling off the page...my brain cells are dying...!”

“So *give it back*.”

“Huh, you want it back?” Oyamada teased. “Now, what should I do~? Maybe I'll give it back if you trade R@IN IDs with me...?”

Truth was, Oyamada had a huge crush on Sogou, but he only showed it through that old, twisted form of affection where a guy picks on a girl to get her attention.

“Oyamada-kun, just give it back to me!” said Sogou.

She clearly didn't realize what he really wanted—I'd always figured she was a little oblivious to that kind of thing.

R@IN was an instant messaging app—the most popular in the world. But you could only talk to a person on there if they allowed it, and Oyamada wanted Sogou to open up that door.

I'd probably look really cool if I rushed to her defense right now...

But I knew that was just an idle thought. A background character like me jumping to her defense would be about as useful as a strong breeze.

Nothing. Meaningless. Worthless.

LOSER used FUTILE GESTURE. It's not very effective...

I knew that with a guy like Oyamada, getting involved would probably just make things worse. If someone at the top of the class hierarchy like Sogou can't face off against him, what's a guy at the very bottom supposed to do?

She seems off today, and her face is kinda red...oh, I get it. She's embarrassed she got caught reading romance novels, huh? Her comebacks are usually more confident than this, but I guess he got to her today...

She might actually be kinda cute.

"Oyamada, come on. Just give it back to her."

I also feel bad for her.

"What did you just say to me?"

"Huh?"

That voice defending her...that was me.

What...? What am I doing? Why am I standing up?

"Mimori...Touka-kun, isn't it? So, er...what's your problem, man?" Oyamada asked, surprised. He *would* be surprised—a background character like me didn't stand up to him every day. The whole atmosphere of the bus had changed—all eyes were glued to me. Sweat prickled on my forehead.

"Uh...it just looks like Sogou-san really wants you to stop, so..." I trailed off.

"You—" Oyamada started.

"Huh?"

He was shaking like Jell-O right out of the mold.

“Oooh, I-look at Mister Cool Guy over here!” he taunted, pointing at me and getting more worked up every moment. “You wanna walk the path of L-O-V-E with Sougo-san? That it? Is that what’s givin’ you the strength to be so unbelievably *cool* right now, Mimori-senpai?! What is this, ‘Rise of the Background Characters’?!”

“Mimori-kun...?”

Sogou turned toward me with a concerned look on her face. I wasn’t sure if that was a good sign or a bad one...but I hoped it was the former.

Okay, how does Mimori Touka get himself out of this one?

“Give it back to her, Shougo.” That was a lifeline from Kirihara—not even Oyamada could talk back to him.

“You’re right, Takuto. We should get to know this cool new Mimori-senpai instead, huh?” Oyamada replied.

“Leave me out of it. I don’t care about guys like him.”

“Whoa, that’s cold, man. I guess that’s the real difference between you and me—I can’t match that level of cool.”

“Do whatever you want about Mimori, just give Sogou her book back already. I don’t like it when you do stuff like this.”

Some of the other students, mostly the girls, stared longingly at Kirihara and whispered among themselves about how kind he was. Oyamada whapped Sogou on the shoulder with her novel a few times.

“Sorry ’bout that, Sogou. I got a little carried away. But you’re a nice enough person to forgive me, right?”

Sogou snatched back her book and glared at him. Oyamada held his hands over his head in surrender.

“I said I was sorry. Jeez...”

Sogou quietly put the novel back in her bag. She seemed to have lost her appetite for reading.

Sogou Ayaka wasn’t just academic and attractive—she also knew ancient martial arts, and she’d even used her skills on Oyamada once before. There was a theory going around that he’d been a little afraid of her ever since. Well, part afraid and part *attracted*, people said.

Kirihara put his earbuds in and started listening to music. Oyamada crashed back into his seat.

“Screw this!”

He kicked hard against the seat in front of him. Most of the students, myself included, jerked their heads back in surprise—even the tour conductor flinched. Only Kiri-hara, Sougo, and the Takao sisters looked unfazed.

“Hey, Yasu~?” Oyamada called out to the timid boy sitting in front of him. He leaned forward and put an arm around Yasu’s shoulder.

“Wh-what is it, Oyamada-san...?”

Yasu Tomohiro was your typical high school bullying victim. He’d been marked for slaughter by Oyamada since the beginning—two years ago. Yaso had accidentally spilled Oyamada’s juice, and unluckily for him it had soaked Oyamada’s smartphone and bricked it. Yasu had snapped that it wasn’t his fault, but at the time he didn’t know who he was snapping at. Oyamada had stayed locked on ever since.

“Y-you really surprised me there...” Yasu mumbled.

“So Mimori-senpai broke rank and tried to punch above his weight class, and you’re sitting there acting like it’s got nothin’ to do with you! It pisses me off! You got somethin’ to say?! C’mon! Look me in the eyes!”

“I-I don’t have anything to say...” mumbled Yasu.

“Why’s 2-C’s trash can talking back to a real man, anyway? Shut your damn mouth!”

“...”

“Answer me!”

“O-okay...”

*Do you want him to shut up, or do you want him to answer you?
Oyamada’s such a weirdo...*

“Give it a rest already, Oyamada. This day and age, if you go too far and he ends up killing himself, you’ll be in trouble, got it? You too, Yasu. If you’re going to jump off a bridge, don’t do it on my watch.”

That was our homeroom teacher, Zakurogi Tamotsu. He taught P.E., and he was nice to the girls, hard on the guys.

No, wait, small correction there. He’s only nice to the cute girls.

On the guys’ side, he only took interest in the top of the class

hierarchy, using those guys as pawns to keep the rest of us in line. As long as we were all under control, he could ignore most of us. The way we were treated varied wildly from student to student—"equality" was a hollow concept in the 2-C classroom. The social order applied to everyone and everything. There was no escaping it.

"Roger! Backing off."

Oyamada knew when to play dumb, back down, and follow orders. He always managed to get on the good side of adults and teachers—when he felt like it, at least—creating a little space to retreat back into if things got bad. That's what made the net he spread around himself so toxic.

He clasped his hands together in an exaggerated gesture of apology.

"Sorry about all that, Yasu-kun~! Let's turn over a new leaf—I'm great at that!"

He didn't look sorry at all.

Stretching his arms and legs wide, Oyamada hurled himself back into his seat with a loud sigh.

"Mimori-senpai starts acting like the main character, and now this beautiful, sparkly school trip travel scene is ruined! What'd I do to deserve this—"

That was when it happened. No warning, just—

White light seared through the bus windows.

Chapter 1: The Goddess and the Summoning

“**Y**OU'RE TRYIN' TO TELL ME we're in another world?! What the hell?!”

Oyamada's voice echoed around the dim, stone-carved room, which was more than big enough to hold all of class 2-C.

When I'd first opened my eyes, I found myself and my entire class here, in a room decked out in what looked like antiques, or maybe props from some medieval fantasy movie. Niches in the walls held lamps that illuminated the stone room with a warm glow.

“You have all been chosen!” a voice rang out.

“Huh?! You better tell me what's goin' on, right now!” Oyamada demanded, practically foaming at the mouth.

Before him stood a woman in a tiara who seemed completely unfazed by his outburst.

She's definitely got guts.

The woman had soft skin and light gray hair, and her eyes—were they *gold*? Color contacts, maybe? But my eyes were especially drawn to her clothes, which were neat, immaculate...and barely there. She wore a scant robe, almost like a western Goddess you'd see in a painting...or maybe if that Goddess had been drawn by a character artist from an anime studio.

“Of course, let me explain. I am the one who summoned you here, after all,” she said. “I am the Goddess Vicius.”



Hang on—a goddess?

Some of the boys started whispering frantically.

“Whoa, so this is, like, one of those *isekai* stories?”

“Totally!”

“C’mon, it’s a dream, dude.”

“Then how’re we all having the same dream?”

“It’s way too realistic for that.”

So...it’s the trope where the whole class gets summoned, huh?

“Why couldn’t I get brought here alone?!”

“Ugh, I feel you.”

“Yeah, she didn’t choose *me*, she just grabbed the whole bus. It sucks.”

I’d heard of books and anime like that—*isekai* stories, where regular people get teleported to—or even reborn into—a fantasy world.

At least we didn’t all end up as babies in this one...

Some of the girls were panicking.

“Where the heck are we?! I don’t get what’s happening!”

“We were, like, on a bus, right?”

“Are we dead?! Am I a freakin’ ghost right now?!”

“All right, you got me! Where’s the camera?”

“Huh?! My phone, like, won’t turn on!”

“Where’s my stuff? You can’t expect me to go without my makeup and outfits!”

I guess I should just go with it for now. If this is a dream, I’ll wake up eventually.

“...”

I reached up and touched my face, then pinched my cheek, *hard*.

Ouch.

I guess it’s not a dream...but the timing of this whole thing worked out great for me. Looks like everybody already forgot what happened back on the bus.

I looked around. A few dozen men dressed like cliché RPG guards stood around us in a circle, armed with swords and spears.

No use resisting, then...

The whole class was unarmed, of course. Even with Kirihara's athletic prowess, Oyamada's brawn, Sogou's martial arts, and whatever mysterious fighting skills the Takao sisters were rumored to have, it would be suicide to try to overwhelm the armed guards. There was no way our homeroom teacher Zakurogi would try anything, either—the only person you could count on for an outburst was Oyamada.

Zakurogi stood up.

"I don't understand what's going on here," he proclaimed, in a voice that tried to bring us all in line, "but we should clearly listen to what this Goddess has to say!" His attempt at leadership was undermined by the way he kept stealing glances at the Goddess's chest—even in another world, Zakurogi was still the same guy.

"Thank you, Sensei," the Goddess said with a neat smile. "If you are all ready, please allow me to explain."

And she started weaving a tale right out of a fantasy novel. Apparently there was an evil being—called "the Demon King," or something—who had been resurrected recently. Whenever that happened, the Kingdom of Alion would summon heroes from "the other world" to be "the chosen ones" and take care of it. The last summoning was 200 years ago, so their existence was more folklore than anything.

This ability to summon heroes gave Alion a special reputation throughout the continent—since nobody knew when the Lord of Evil would return, they had to stay on Alion's good side. Even more respected than the Kingdom was the Goddess Vicius, source of those summoned heroes. Not even the King of Alion could lay a finger on members of the Cult of Vicius.

Of everyone assembled before the Goddess, of course Kirihara Takuto felt that he had the right to speak.

"So, you want us to defeat this Demon King, I guess?"

"That is correct," came the Goddess's answer.

"Hunh. And what if we don't?"

"Then you may never return home."

“There’s a way to go back?”

“There is, but only if you defeat the Demon King.”

“Why?” Kiri-hara asked bluntly.

The Goddess signaled for one of her guards, who handed her a jet-black collar.

“To send you back, I require Demon King Essence. This is a very special kind of magical power.” She raised two fingers. “We know of only two ways to obtain it. The first is to get it directly from the source—the Demon King’s heart. The second is to defeat the Demon King and gather the essence in crystal form when he dies, using this collar. I cannot perform the ceremony to return you to your world without the essence in some form.”

“I don’t give a damn about your stupid kingdom or your Demon King! What’d he ever do to me, anyway?! Screw this!” Oyamada yelled. Clearly, learning the full story hadn’t chilled him out.

The Goddess got to her knees and knelt before him.

“Heroes, I humbly entreat you. Please, save this world,” she begged.

“H-heroes? I-I’m a hero too?” Oyamada seemed shocked. Maybe it was because he was so used to being treated like a naughty kid by authority figures, or just because it felt good to be called a hero by a beautiful Goddess, but Oyamada calmed instantly.

“You are our saviors—each and every one of you,” she declared.

“E-excuse me...” Sogou raised her hand as she spoke. “Can I ask something?”

“Go ahead.”

“Um... M-my name is Sogou Ayaka,” said Sogou, bowing her head.

“Oh! How very polite of you, Sogou-san.”

“N-not at all.”

“Please, go on. What would you like to ask?”

“A-as you can see, we’re all normal human beings. I doubt that any of us have experience in battle.”

Yeah...even Sogou’s martial arts skills probably won’t do much in a

real fight to the death...

“So, well...you keep calling us heroes and saviors, but...I honestly don’t know if we’ll be able to help you at all.”

“That won’t be a problem,” the Goddess replied with complete certainty. “All of you have special powers. Powers that other humans do not possess.”

“But...” Sogou stammered, “we don’t. I don’t understand...?”

“Of course you don’t believe that you have powers,” she continued at the same unhurried pace. “You didn’t...until I summoned you here.”

I don’t know how to describe it, but...it seems like she knows exactly what Sogou’s going to say before she says it. She said that she’s summoned heroes to save the world before, right? Do they all react just like this at first? Is she used to answering these exact questions in the exact same way every time—even the same words?

“I can’t take it!!” Oyamada shouted. “There’s no way in hell this is really another world. You’ve got us on camera right now, don’t you?! It ain’t even funny! Who writes this stuff? I’ll kill ‘em!”

“Bring it forth.” Ignoring Oyamada’s outburst, the Goddess gestured to her guards again.

After some time, a ragged-looking man was escorted into the room. His hands were bound in chains, and he looked uneasy, flanked by guards on each side who pushed him forward with the points of their spears.

“Wh-what is that?” asked one of the girls, pointing across the room from the figure with trembling hands.

It wasn’t a person.

It was a three-eyed wolf.

At least, I think that’s a wolf...

The creature was enormous, with three flashing golden eyes and wine-red fur. It wore a rough collar attached to a heavy chain, which was gripped tightly by a particularly beefy guard.

“This sort of beast doesn’t exist in your world, does it?” the Goddess asked.

“Y-you obviously just painted a wolf! Screw you, that’s a costume or something! Just die already!” Oyamada had clearly made up his

mind.

The Goddess gave another signal.

“Grrr... Grrrawrrr!!”

The ragged man flinched as he realized what was about to happen.

“No!! S-sto—!”

The three-eyed wolf leaped to the attack, claws tearing into its prey.

“Aaaaaah—!!”

One of the girls screamed, and the shrill noise echoed through the stone chamber.

“Urraaagh! Guuh! Aaah—”

The man’s screams stopped abruptly, and he lay still. The wolf began feeding on the corpse, tearing at flesh with its teeth.

One of the boys threw up.

What happened next, though, would kill all our doubts.

The Goddess stretched her arm toward the wolf and began to speak.

“Oh exorcising holy fire, in the name of the Goddess Vicius fulfil your duty and purge this monster!”

A shimmering circle formed in the air in front of her outstretched hand.

“Fireball!”

In an instant, the wolf was engulfed in white fire. It struggled and writhed as it tried to escape, but it was quickly consumed by the inferno and burnt to ash. The smell of charred meat filled the room.

The boys, who’d all gathered off to one side, started murmuring to each other.

“Th-that was real magic just now, wasn’t it?”

“You mean sorcery?”

“Wh-what’s the difference...?”

“So she was telling the truth about the ‘other world’ thing, huh...”

“She brought out that proof quick, oh man.”

“That was incredible! I’m still in shock...”

“It’s kinda exciting...!”

It was weird—they didn’t seem that upset. They were acting like this was a fun way to shake up their boring everyday routine.

On the other hand, some of the girls had started to cry. Others sank to the floor in fear where they stood. Most were just in shock.

“Wh-what was that...?”

“It’s gotta be CG. Or a light trick, or something. Right?”

“Urgh...that burned meat smell... I feel sick.”

“No...!”

“I...I can’t take it anymore! I wanna go home...”

Even Kiriara looked shocked. Not afraid, of course, but he looked genuinely surprised by what had happened. Oyamada just looked angry, but for once it was at himself. He’d been clinging to the idea that this all had to be fake, but he’d been unmistakably proven wrong. Being forced to accept this reality made him *furious*.

Sogou was in a cold sweat, clearly shaken but trying desperately to hide it. She was comforting one of the crying girls, making soothing noises about how everything was going to be fine. She probably felt that she had to stay strong as class rep.

Even at a time like this...Sogou’s tough.

The elder Takao sister started talking to her twin.

“I see...so this truly is a completely different world from our own. Perhaps thinking of it as a different planet will help us understand for the moment. So, treating that as the truth, we need to consider our best course of action, Itsuki.”

“You’re so *composed* in a situation like this...you’re amazing, Aneki,” Itsuki replied.

“Just think of this as part of your mental training. Instead of wasting our time on pessimism and panic, trying to deny the reality that’s clearly before us, we should accept this situation and analyze the rules of our new surroundings to ensure our safety. We must not let our logical thought be hampered by emotion or made dull by excessive

sentiment. Right now, we should only carry as many emotions as are absolutely indispensable.”

“I...I just can’t beat you, Aneki. I’ll never reach your level...”

“Just keep training hard, Itsuki. You can do it.”

“All right...I’ll do my best, Aneki.”

They’re acting so calm...like, extreme levels of calm. Though I guess they’re practically from a different planet to begin with.

Yasu seemed bewildered, but looking closer...there was a faint smile spreading on his lips.

That seems weird...

Zakurogi’s expression was easier to understand—his jaw was hanging open like that “Mouth of Truth” statue that people stick their hands in.

“Uh...let’s do what the Goddess asks! We won’t get anywhere unless we decide to trust her, so we should assume that everything she’s told us is true!” Zakurogi sputtered, his terror at the spontaneous combustion he just witnessed clear in his voice. If he’d had a way to get a big white flag, he’d probably be waving it frantically.

The man’s corpse and the ashes that were once the wolf were swept away and carried off somewhere else. We were ushered to a waist-high pedestal with a crystal set on it, and ordered to put our hands on it one by one—some kind of test.

Even our worst troublemakers were quietly following orders now. As the Goddess prepared to call us up by our class numbers, a few hooded attendants approached to help her. This Goddess had thrown in our faces exactly how much danger we were in—I, at least, had zero desire to resist her, and I could only assume the rest of the class felt the same.

I wonder what she’d do if I did? Maybe she’d get me with that fire spell...she seems like somebody who gets what she wants by any means necessary, and she’s obviously got the power to back it up.

First in line, Amakawa laid his hands on the crystal. After a moment, it glowed with a blue light, and a murmur rose from the gallery. The Goddess smiled and clasped her hands together.

“You have potential,” she said.

The hooded other-worlders who surrounded the Goddess strained to inspect us, their eyes gleaming in the light of the crystal as each of our classmates took their turn. The tests continued much the same, until Oyamada's turn.

As he touched the crystal, it glowed a blinding red under his hands—the brightest light so far.

What do the colors mean?

“Such strong light!” the hooded figures cried out in praise.

“Oh!” the Goddess exclaimed joyfully, “this is positively wonderful!”

“I don't really get it, but...I guess I aced the test, huh? I could get used to this other-world gig! Oyamada is *hot stuff* over here! Guess I'll just have to be hero enough for all of ya!”

Oh god... “hot stuff”? He's acting like an obnoxious jerk, as usual...but I can't totally blame him. That glowing rock thing just told him he's the best. Who wouldn't be happy to hear that?

Oyamada got to be king for the day—for maybe thirty minutes. Then Kiriara laid his hands on the crystal.

“I-impossible! Th-this can't be...! H-how...?!”

There was flash of golden light—the hooded figures jumped back in surprise.

Ka-crack!

The crystal shattered and fell to the floor in pieces.

“T-to think someone could break the measurement crystal!” one of the hooded figures exclaimed, excitedly wiping sweat from his brow.

“Whatever. So that was good, was it? I'm not surprised.” Kiriara deadpanned.

The Goddess smiled broadly and clapped her hands together.

“This is marvellous, Kiriara-san! You're an S-Class, the highest rank possible!” she declared.

S-Class? Sounds pretty important.

“I thought this was another world—you still give alphabet grades here?” Kiriara asked suspiciously.

“I've used terms you're familiar with to make this easier for you to

understand,” she replied.

“Hmm. Why’s S-Class the highest?”

“The ‘S’ stands for ‘special’, of course.”

Kirihara scratched his head.

“Hunh. Right...it’s not like I did anything special to get it, though. I just touched the crystal, same as everyone else.”

Kirihara’s circle of fans gazed at him with even more admiration.

“He’s so *cool*! I knew he’d get the best rank!”

“Takuto-kun is still someone special in a whole other world~! ♪”

“He’s so *wonderful*!”

“Protect me, Takuto-kun!”

Kirihara let out an exasperated sigh.

“Breaking some crystal doesn’t make me special...it’s just a thing that happened, yeah?”

Oyamada sidled up to the Goddess.

“Wh-what class am I, then?! I’m hot stuff, right?!”

“You’re an A-Class, Oyamada-san.”

“And what’s above A?!”

“That would be S-Class.”

“One step away from the top...” he said, gritting his teeth. “Aw man, figures I can’t match up to Takuto...”

The Goddess signaled for another crystal to be brought in, and the fragments of the old one were swept away.

The measurements continued.

“N-not possible-! This is—”

Another wave of disbelief rippled through the hooded figures when Sogou Ayaka took her turn. Her light pulsed brilliant silver, and...

BOOM!

The orb shattered into dust, sending a cloud of fine powder in all directions.

“*Cough, cough*—Th-the crystal...again?! I’ve never seen a reaction like this, Goddess!” one of the hooded figures spluttered.

The Goddess smiled again, elegantly wafting the dust away from her face.

“Two S-Class heroes in one group...this is truly remarkable.”

Sogou and Kirihara have the same power rating, then... They really are 2-C's main characters.

One replacement crystal later, the measurements were back underway. The next surprises were the Takao sisters—though they really weren't that surprising, I guess. Itsuki's light glowed yellow, shining much brighter than all the students before her. I could see the Goddess's excitement rising.

“Another A-Class—this makes two! Astonishing, truly! Two S-Class and two A-Class heroes...this group already has the greatest potential I've ever seen!”

Next, Takao Hijiri laid her hands on the crystal, spreading white light that illuminated the whole room with its glow for a long moment before fading.

“Th-this is incredible...” the Goddess said with wide eyes, trembling with excitement like jelly in an earthquake. “Th-three S-Class heroes...! We're usually lucky to get one! These are the best results I've ever seen!” With tears in her eyes, she spread her arms wide in ecstasy, puffing out her ample chest in triumph.

So I guess she's prone to overacting.

“Well then, let us continue! Next, if you would!” she called out with another elaborate sweeping gesture.

After Takao, the results all came out average for a while, and the responses from the onlookers were much less enthusiastic.

At last, it was my turn—Mimori Touka.

I stood in front of the crystal, nervous, feeling measured and probed. I slipped my hands over the surface of the orb.

I swallowed hard.

Beneath my hands, a faint light rose within the crystal. It was soft—weak, even. Purple in color.

Gold, sliver, black, white...those were colors that I thought of as having special meaning.

Purple, huh...

Mine was the only purple result so far.

What does this mean...? This is the weakest light anyone's had so far, isn't it?

"Next! Place your hands upon the crystal!"

The Goddess didn't even react—she moved on, ignoring me completely. It was the first time that had happened, too.

I don't even deserve a comment? Seriously?

"Excuse me, but...is my class—" I tried to say.

"Next~!"

Ignored. Again. It's like I'm not even here.

I walked slowly back to my place.

A background character. Even in this world, that's all I get, huh?

This is reality, though. Not like being summoned to another world would make a guy like me special. This is who I am.

I'm Mimori Touka. That should be enough. But there's always a hierarchy, in every time and every place. It's always there, and you can never escape it.

My test was followed by a handful more average results—all apparently better than mine, at least. The Goddess kept up her busy commentary on each measurement, even if she ended up repeating "Oh, how splendid!" more than a few times.

At long last, the final student stepped forward to be measured.

"It seems we found all the big hitters in the first half," she said, raising a hand to her cheek. "But three S-Class and two A-Class heroes...? Simply *marvelous*. I can't expect more—that would be greedy!"

The final student was Yasu Tomohiro. He placed his shaky hand on the crystal, took a deep breath, and swallowed. Watching him, though, I could see a quiet confidence hidden beneath the anxiety. It was like Yasu knew that his fate was in the orb's hands, and accepting that gave him a kind of calm.

The hooded figures recoiled in shock.

"It...it can't be!"

The orb was engulfed in jet black, sending billowing dark smoke

up into the rafters.

“Goddess! H-he might be...”

“It appears so. It has been a long time since I’ve seen the crystal react this way...not since the Hero of Darkness upset it all those years ago.”

Yasu’s mouth curled into a smile, which widened into a smirk. Then he let out a peal of laughter.

“I knew it... It was about time,” Yasu said. A sudden change had come over him—in an instant, the nervous Yasu I’d known had disappeared. Boldly, he turned to the Goddess.

“Tell me my rank, Goddess!”

“You are an A-Class hero,” she answered.

“Hmph. Same as Oyamada. I figured that sinister black smoke would make it at least an S, but still...”

Oyamada drew himself up indignantly, and turned on Yasu.

“What was that, Yasu?! You wanna try again, but show some respect this time? You get some half-decent results and you’re a big man all of a sudden?!”

For a moment, Yasu drew back—maybe out of habit. But he recovered quickly and returned a rebellious smile.

“We’re on the same level, you and I.”

“Huh?!”

Now it was Yasu’s turn. He puffed out his chest and closed in on Oyamada.

“We’re both A-Class heroes, huh? Equals. So why not get along?” He grinned rebelliously, his voice mocking. “How about it, Oyamada~?”

“You think you’re better than me?! I’ll kill you, Yasu! I’ll—!”

In an instant, the Goddess was between them, magic circles appearing from her hands again.

It’s almost like she’s holding them at gunpoint...

“You’re both fine A-Class heroes, so spare me the rivalry. I’ll allow minor disagreements, but I absolutely won’t permit heroes to fight one another. Is that clear?”

The Goddess smiled.

“All of our A-Class heroes are valuable resources to me, after all.”

Oyamada was frozen. Yasu took a step back. My spine was tingling just watching them.

Was she really about to kill them both?

I know I'm intimidated by her, but it's more than that... This must be how it feels to come face to face with a predator. I'm frozen. I don't even want to run.

“Then that's settled, isn't it? Now, let me show you how to use your powers.”

“Status Open!”

Those words echoed in all directions, overlapping and mingling in the air.

Saying that phrase made patterns appear across the palm of your hand, and a holographic-looking display appear over it.

“I get it! This is how we check our skills, right? It's just like a game!”

“Here comes the *isekai* stat display trope!”

“What's this thing? Is it the skill tree?”

“None of this looks real, though, does it? Like, it'd fit in perfectly in a VRMMO!”

The boys were chatting excitedly as they poked at their new displays.

“Hey, nerds—we don't know much about games, so you'd better teach us, got it?”

“It works kinda like a smartphone... We can do this, right?”

“It totally looks like a social network game, right? Do my log-in bonuses from my games back home carry over?”

“At least there's no beauty trait or anything!”

“What's a skill?”

“They're, like, special moves, I think?”

“Whoa, like a one-hit kill? That's totally psycho!”

“Oh, I get it! Get rid of the ‘S’ and you’ve got ‘K-I-L-L’! That’s so scary!”

A few minutes ago, those same girls had been crying over the wolf incident. Some of them had even thrown up.

Back on their feet already, huh? That was fast.

“I have created an efficient stat system that should be easy for you to adjust to. As Goddess, I can easily make this sort of alteration to suit your needs and translate your new abilities into something you understand.”

That explained why everything seemed so much like a video game—everyone in class had at least some experience with that kind of thing. The stat display even had a smartphone-style home screen.

I could get used to this stuff. I guess a Goddess can do pretty much anything.

“Th-this is...Dragonic Buster?!” a hooded figure exclaimed, looking over Kirihara’s shoulder in amazement. “Incredible! Kirihara-dono can already use one of his skills! And these stats...is this really a level 1 ability?!”

“So, uh...you’re saying I’m good?” Kirihara responded.

“Heroes who can use their skills immediately from level 1 are rare—I can only remember a few from previous summonings!”

“Huh. Doesn’t sound like that big a deal, to be honest.”

His gaggle of girls turned to him again in worship and longing.

“Takuto’s so awesome...”

“Even his personality’s hot! Oh, Kirihara-kun...!”

“He’s so humble!”

“Even in another world, we can count on him!”

“I want to be with you! Marry me!”

The next outburst from the hooded figures came from near Sogou.

“S-Sogou-dono’s skill tree! I’ve never seen just one branch like this before! This is a Specialist tree!”

“Specialist...?” replied Sogou.

Sogou didn’t seem to know much about games—she was still

struggling with the vocabulary.

Well, it's not like I know what a Specialist tree is either. It sounds impressive, though.

“Oyamada-dono and Yasu-dono are true A-Class heroes, too! Their stats are far beyond those of the normal ranks, even at level 1! And Oyamada-dono has +500 Vitality!” the Goddess chimed in. She segued right into an explanation of more statistics.

Apparently, the stats displayed weren't the only things that defined how good we were. We had base stats and stat modifiers, but only the modifiers were visible on our stat screens. Our base stat was from before we were summoned—a representation of our strength back on Earth. Add the stat modifier to the base stat, and that's your current stat in that category.

Does that mean we could go down to zero HP and still survive because of our hidden base stat? Hmm...

The stat explanation led into Q&A Corner with the Goddess, and that was when the discussion really changed. There were no more questions about the summoning we'd just experienced. Instead, everyone was focused on their own stats and learning more about this new world.

Well, everyone *strong* was stepping up to learn more. Others had lost the will to go on, and gathered together in the corner of the room, fading into the background.

Collapsing into despair. Wallowing in sadness. Unable to accept reality.

There were many ways to find yourself in that corner...

“I can't get a good look!” another hooded figure complained. I glanced over to see the complainer hovering near the Takao sisters.

“Wh-what's with these two? It's like...they exude some strange presence...”

“They're beautiful, too—almost as beautiful as Sogou-dono! I daresay they may be as heavenly as the renowned Seras Ashrain!”

“Be careful not to underestimate them—they are heroes ranked S-Class and A-Class!”

It seemed that even the people of this world were repelled by the

unique aura the Takao sisters brought with them everywhere. The hooded figures were trying to catch glimpses of their stats from several steps away.

The Takao sisters are even trouble for these guys, eh?

The older sister calmly observed her pursuers.

“If it can bring us a way to return to our world, then learning to use this strange stat system to our advantage should be our immediate goal, Itsuki. Once we are allowed to wander freely, we will gather more information.”

“I’m a dummy, so I’ll just follow you, Aneki,” Itsuki replied.

“Knowing your own ignorance is the first step to enlightenment, Itsuki.”

“Heh heh, can’t help that I was *brawn* this way”

“That was very amusing, Itsuki.”

“A-amusing... You’re always so serious, Aneki...”

“I’m a serious person, I suppose.”

Are they fazed at all by what happened...? I’ve gotta learn to be more like them.



“Status open!”

Let’s take a look... My stats are...

“Huh?”

Too-ka Mimori

Level 1

HP: +3 MP: +33

Attack: +3 Defense: +3 Vitality: +3

Speed: +3 Intelligence: +3

Title: E-Class Hero

My stats look...really low.

She said that Oyamada has +500 vitality, right? My MP’s the only one higher than three...

E-Class Hero...if that’s alphabetical, I must be pretty far down the list.

My heart sank.

They even misspelled my name—it’s Touka, with a “U.” And the weird dash makes it look like I’m a foreigner...maybe it’s tied to the pronunciation over here? But seriously, even as a chosen hero in another world, they can’t be bothered to get my name right. I’m a background character through and through.

Where’s the skill tree, anyway?

I stared, as if something would appear if I looked longer.

“There isn’t one,” I sighed.

I tried flicking down like everybody else, but nothing showed up—just an empty space. There was only the root at the bottom, a square labeled “Unique Skills.” Everyone else had a simple branching diagram extending upward, laying out all their skills, but mine was just a stump.

“There’s not even a sprout on mine, huh.”

“Oh, my!” the Goddess exclaimed.

“Wha—?!”

I suddenly noticed her behind me, leaning over my shoulder to see

the stat screen in my hand.

“Excuse me, but...what’s wrong with my stats?” I asked.

No answer. She returned silently to the others and began answering their questions again.

“Ignored, huh?”

We grown-ups have a right to reject your questions. You got that?

Those were words of wisdom from my old teacher, T***gawa-sensei. It seemed like they applied here, too.

“Even here, I’m just a background character.”

Who cares? E-Class seems pretty low, but I’m still a hero, right? I’m sure there’s a place for me here, somewhere. I’ll just live in the background of this world, like an NPC or something. I’ll lie low and get by, just like I always have.

I sat cross-legged on the ground in thought, idly flicking through my stat panels.

“Oh, so that’s how it works.”

If I click here, it displays my unique skills, I guess.

“Let me see...”

Unique Skill: Apply Status Effect / Available for use

Huh. Kiri-hara gets “Dragon Buster,” and I get “Apply Status Effect.” Mine sounds pretty dull in comparison.

“Hmm? Is my skill tree...backwards?”

I tried flicking up.

“Hey, it’s growing in the other direction.”

Everyone else’s trees were growing upwards, but mine was made up of a few faint lines wilting below the root—so faint I hadn’t noticed them at first. But even though the lines were faint, the information about the skills themselves was clear.

Paralyze: Level 1

Sleep: Level 1

Poison: Level 1

So I've got three of these "Apply Status Effect" skills...?

I used to play social network games and RPGs sometimes, so the skill names at least seemed familiar.

The question is whether they're any good or not. I'm E-Class, so they probably suck, right? But didn't one of those hooded guys say that being able to use your skills at level 1 was amazing? All right...you can do this...time to ask the Goddess what's up. Where is she?

She was talking to somebody—not one of those hooded people, though. I reflexively ducked behind a pillar.

Ugh, why am I hiding like this? Getting ignored twice really did a number on me, I guess. Gotta be brave here...deep breath.

Okay, I'm ready.

I gathered all my courage and resolve to come out from behind the pillar, and...couldn't even take a step in her direction.

"I heard there's an E-Class mixed in there."

They're talking about me?

"What should we do, Vicius?"

He's using a Goddess's first name...? Who is that?

"Don't worry. Even the E-Class heroes have a part to play," she replied.

Ten minutes later, I couldn't help but notice that there were way more guards hanging around. There were at least thirty more than when I last checked...and the new ones looked even tougher than the originals.

Their numbers, and the expressions on the new guards faces, spoke volumes—they definitely weren't going to let us escape.

Or maybe...they aren't going to let me, specifically, escape?

Guards were clearly watching me—they were making their way toward me from the left and right.

“Be warned—none of you try anything,” a guard to my right began, gripping the hilt of his sword. “You may be heroes from another world, but freshly summoned like this, you’re no match for us.”

So they’ll cut us down if we step out of line...

“Heroes~! Please move into the next room!” the Goddess ordered. The class filed in behind her as she turned to lead us away.

“E-everyone...listen to what the Goddess says, okay...?”

Zakurogi was still half-heartedly trying to lead the class, but most of them were blatantly ignoring him. His crystal measurement test had classified him as D-Class—the Goddess had explained that adults over 25 were more likely to slip into the lower ranks, which was why they usually targeted younger people for summoning.

The low ranking had caused a change in Zakurogi—his self-assured leadership from earlier was totally gone, and the students had almost entirely stopped looking to him for any kind of guidance. Why would they? He was lower on this new hierarchy than they were, and it’s not like he’d endeared himself to the class with his personality or teaching skills back on earth. The Goddess had easily stepped into the role of our homeroom teacher.

We were led into a room with what looked like a large magic circle pattern on the floor.

“Would the student whose name I call please step forward into the center of the circle?” the Goddess announced. “Oh, and after this final matter is taken care of, you’ll all have some time to relax!”

That last declaration was met with smiles and tangible relief—no doubt everyone’s heads had been spinning since we got here. Finally, they’d get a break from all this.

Oyamada raised his hand.

“What’s this room for, anyway?”

“The ceremony,” replied the Goddess.

“Ceremony? Are you going to summon someone else here, then?” Kiri-hara asked.

She lightly clapped her hands together and smiled.

“Too-ka Mimori-san,” she announced. “Please step into the center of the circle.”

“Huh...? Me?”

I remembered what the Goddess had said earlier...

“Don’t worry. Even the E-Class heroes have a part to play.”

I swallowed.

What does she want me to do...?

“Nnh!” I stood there frozen, terrified of taking that step.

“Go.” I felt a spearpoint press into my back from one of the guards. “You want to die?”

There’s nowhere to run...I have such a bad feeling about this, but I couldn’t fight back if I wanted to.

Escorted by guards, I made my way into the magic circle. I gathered my courage and spoke.

“Excuse me, Goddess?”

“Yes?” she replied.

At least she isn’t ignoring me this time. I guess it’s harder to get away with that when everyone’s focused on me.

“What is this? Why am I going first?”

“Too-ka Mimori, of all the heroes of class 2-C, you are the lowest ranked.”

Yeah, I know. I’m the only E-Class, right?

“Since the beginning of time, the lowest ranked heroes have never been of any use whatsoever. Instead, they tend to cling to their higher-ranked peers and pull them down through their incompetence. So, eventually, I decided that all heroes who fall into E-Class...are to be *eliminated*.”

“Wh-what...?”

Eliminated...?

“Unfortunately, doing that here and now would give the other summoned heroes an unpleasant shock—some of them might have an inconvenient attachment to you, after all. In the past, I tried transporting the E-Class heroes to a jail cell here in the palace to kill them in secret, but even then, the news got out and caused trouble among the heavy hitters. So that’s why I settled upon...” the Goddess opened her arms magnanimously, “giving the lowest ranked heroes a

chance to redeem themselves.”

“A chance to redeem myself...? Wh-what does that mean?”

“This magic circle of teleportation will send you into the *ruins*,” she declared.

“Ruins...?”

“If you manage to find your way through the ruins to the surface, I promise not to interfere with you any further. Alion will grant you your life.”

“A-are these ruins...dangerous?”

“Who knows? Well, most of Alion’s dangerous criminals *are* sent there to serve their sentences, but—I don’t need to answer such questions from *you*~.”

Is she...actually serious...?

Even if the Goddess was trying to be vague, the answer was pretty clear—nobody would return from the ruins alive. It was a landfill—a convenient way to kill off prisoners without having to pull the trigger yourself. The ruins would do the job for you.

Or maybe more monsters like that three-eyed wolf thing.

“Perhaps you don’t fully understand your situation. I’m sure the name of the ruins will help,” the Goddess said slowly and deliberately. “They are called...the Ruins of Disposal.”

I hung my head and clenched my fists.

Disposal...why is this happening...?

“Oh!”

There’s still something—a last ray of hope! This might save me!

“Goddess!”

“Yes?”

“I have something to tell you! M-my skill! I can already use my unique skill!”

The Goddess put a hand to her cheek.

“And...?”

Huh? Why isn’t she reacting...

“I-I checked the stat panel, and it says ‘available for use’! That’s

good, isn't it?!"

"If it were an A-Class skill, perhaps..."

"My skill is called 'Apply Status Effect'! I think it lets me, like, paralyze or poison things—"

The Goddess just sighed.

"Listen here...in this world, status effect spells are almost completely worthless."

Time froze.

"Huh...?"

Worthless?

"They hardly ever work. They rarely succeed when used on the lowest-level monsters, let alone anything mid-level or higher. And even if you miraculously get one to stick, the effects are minor and the duration extremely short. They have worked like that every single time."

"Th-that can't be—"

"In other words, you drew a losing hand, as befitting an E-Class hero." She idly played with her hair as she continued. "And I have to say, your stat modifiers are absolutely *abysmal*. There's no hope that they'll improve much even with leveling—it wouldn't surprise me if you improve even slower than a completely average human."

Then...why did you call me a hero? You bring me here, you call me a hero...then you throw me away, just like that?!

"B-but wait! Isn't *disposal* a little too—"

"Ugh."

I was interrupted by a sound of disgust.

"This is pathetic."

It was Kirihara.

"You're wasting my time. I could be doing anything else right now, but I have to listen to *you*? We left you alone when you were skulking around in the background, and this is how you repay us?" He let out an irritated sigh. "Just get this over with already. Everybody's waiting on you. The girls are tired, see? I feel sorry for them—don't you?"

The girls looked positively enthralled by his words.

“K-Kirihara-kun!”

“He’s so kind!”

“It’s like he knows exactly what we want before we even have to say it! So *considerate*!”

“Who does that Mimori-kun think he is, anyway?! He needs to read the atmosphere in here!”

“Ha, he can’t read the atmosphere—he’s practically made of air himself!”

“Pfft! You’re right—that’s hilarious!”

“Quit whining!”

“Just get it over with!”

“We’re tired, so stop wasting our time!”

“Don’t you know when to give up?!”

The boys had joined in at some point. Oyamada was grinning. Then someone stepped out of the crowd and started coming toward me.

It was Yasu Tomohiro...with compassion in his eyes.

“You okay, Mimori?” he said, placing both hands on my shoulders.

“Y-Yasu...”

His eyes narrowed.

“Hold on a second there, Mimori. Listen to what you’re saying.”

“Uh, Wh-what...?” I stuttered.

“It’s Yasu-*san*. You’re an E-Class, bottom of the heap. I’m an A-Class. Show some respect.” The compassion had drained from Yasu’s eyes, and a new expression was rising—he looked at me like I was scum on the bottom of his shoe, like he knew with total certainty how superior he was.

When was it again?

Oyamada had just beaten Yasu up. I'd happened to see the very end of it—Yasu was on the ground, then Oyamada spat on him and left.

I plucked up the courage to go over. Yasu was covered in mud—I remember thinking that Oyamada had gone too far this time.

"You should really talk to a teacher or somebody higher up about this. Somebody other than Zakurogi."

He didn't reply.

"C'mon, I'll go with you. This is too much, even for Oyamada. I mean, I'm scared of him, too, but I'm also...angry. He can't keep getting away with this."

I reached down to him, trying to help him back onto his feet.

"Let's get this over with, Yasu."

"Why does it have to be you?" Yasu snapped. He slapped my hand away. "Nobody looks down on me, Mimori! Especially not *you*!"

"Wh-what...?" I was stunned.

"You think *you're* above me?! Screw you! I'm better than *you*, at least!"

That was when I realized.

I'm air.

I'm an NPC.

I'm not at the top or the bottom—I'm not even on the ladder. Nobody cares if I'm around or not. I'm barely even noticed, just part of the background.

But Yasu wasn't like me. He was at the bottom of the school pecking order, but he was still very much a part of it, and he never stopped thinking about his place in it.

"You're not better than me! I don't need your pity, got it?! It pisses me off! Just go *die* already, Mimori! Get out of my sight!"

That might have been when I first noticed it.

The hierarchy of everything.

Yasu leaned in close to me.

“It’s just what I expected,” he murmured. “I knew it...I just *knew* a change was coming, y’know? I knew I was due for a comeback. I was gonna go to a first-rate college, get a job at a top company, and succeed at life—unlike these morons. At least half of them are below me already. They’re short-sighted idiots, oblivious to the bigger picture—get it?”

He’s like a different person...or is this the real Yasu Tomohiro?

I’d only seen this side of him once before.

“Just go die already, Mimori! Get out of my sight!”

Was that the real him?

He continued his murmured tirade.

“Oyamada’s awful, of course, but Kirihara isn’t much better. They’re both so *conceited*. And all the self-important idiots pretending to be good people—I hope they get sick and die. Only people worth a damn in this class are Ayaka, Hijiri, and Itsuki. The rest of them are all *trash*. Bottom of the freaking barrel.”

He was even calling the girls by their first names now—I could remember how he used to nervously stammer out “Sogou-san.”

“Aaah...that felt good,” he said in my ear, then he turned his back on me and stepped away with a wave.

“All right, then. Give it your best shot, I guess—you don’t have long to live, trash hero.”

I stood there in silence. Now I understood. Yasu was ecstatic and just needed to tell someone. He couldn’t talk to the rest of the class, but Mimori Touka, E-Class hero, was about to leave forever and then die. Nobody would believe me if I tried to expose him—anything I said would just be the last bitter cries of a loser who couldn’t accept his fate. Yasu had used me as a safe outlet for his gloating.

“What’d you say, Yasu?” Oyamada asked with a sneer.

“I offered to hear his last words,” Yasu said casually, “but it’s no use—he wouldn’t even listen. He’s more hopeless than I thought.”

I just stood there, frozen in place.

Wh-what the hell? What did I do to deserve this...?

None of this made any sense. It was absurd. I felt indignant rage building inside me, ready to erupt.

The Goddess turned her palms toward the magic circle.

“Let us begin the ceremony.”

The ground underneath me started to glow.

It's no use. Nobody's coming to save me, and there's no way this coldhearted Goddess would show me mercy.

The guards surrounding the magic circle readied their bows, and the hooded figures raised their hands in my direction and lowered their heads.

“If you try to escape the magic circle, my guards will kill you.” The Goddess smiled in warning. None of my classmates moved to help me—nobody dared step out of line with armed guards surrounding us, and Kirihara, top of the hierarchy, had practically condemned me himself.

It's more than just that—who would risk their life to save a background character? Nobody. Who cares if the NPCs die? This is the story of the chosen heroes' quest to defeat the Demon King. They don't need Mimori Touka for that.

THUD.

The Goddess threw something at my feet.

“What's this...? A leather pouch?”

“That,” she said, “is your unique item. When heroes are summoned, a unique magic item appears alongside each of them. That shoddy little pouch is yours.”

I turned the flimsy thing over in my hands.

“My...magic item...”

A restless murmur rose up from class 2-C—this was the first any of us had heard of magic items. But, as usual, the Goddess had an answer prepared.

“Not to worry! While you were still asleep after your summoning, I collected the items from you for safekeeping—they're waiting for you in the next room. I'm sure they'll prove extremely effective once you get your hands on them!”

This Goddess...she knew exactly what she was doing. If we'd woken up from summoning with powerful magical items in our hands and decided to rebel, that could have caused problems for her. That's why she took them away from us—as a precaution.

The Goddess laughed.

"These magic items are just one more reason to love hero summoning! Well, anyway," she said, her gaze falling back to me and my pouch, "I did try pouring a bit of mana into it, but it seems all your sad little pouch is good for is giving off light."

"Light?"

"It's a lamp, I suppose? The ruins are dark, so it should prove useful to you in the very near future. There's a mana conduit crystal attached to it so you can pour mana into the bag. If you manage to make it up to the surface in one piece, you could sell this and make enough to live on for a while! Wonderful!" The Goddess had her arms stretched wide again as she turned back to the others.

"Did you all witness what just happened here? I offered Too-ka Mimori mercy! Even the lowest of the low should be given a chance! I am a compassionate Goddess, kind even to the weak. I will even stoop to bless an E-Class hero as I dispose of it!"

She turned back to me.

"But the rest of you have no need of my compassion! You are all better than Too-ka Mimori! Each one of you is powerful in your own right!"

The magic circle glowed ever more brightly, and the Goddess's voice rose with it.

"Every one of you is a hero, but even among heroes, there is an order! I imagine some of you are worried about your rank, or that you aren't as good as everyone else! Please, have no fear! You have all been chosen! Each one of you is extraordinary! Look! Look at Too-ka Mimori!"

The whole class turned to look at me in unison.

"He is unmistakably a hero as well...but he is different from you! All of you are D-Class or above! You are *better* than him! You have an innate advantage in this world!"

"Don't worry. Even the E-Class heroes have a part to play."

I finally understood what she meant by that.

I'm a sacrifice. The S-Class and A-Class heroes already feel good about themselves, but B- through D-Class were probably feeling inferior and unsure about their average rankings. If somebody like me is below them, though, they'll always have someone to look down on and feel superior to. They can build themselves up.

"At least I'm better than Mimori Touka. I'm glad I didn't get sent to the Ruins of Disposal. I'm still here. I'm one of the lucky ones."

This is the ceremony the Goddess put together for them. One big lie. An illusion. And me as the scapegoat. That's why she has to make it clear that I'm a hero, too—even among heroes, they've been chosen.

"Dammit..."

So this is my "part to play," huh? There're probably even worse monsters than that three-eyed wolf in the Ruins of Disposal. All I have are worthless spells and hopeless stats.

I'm going to die.

"Wait, please—!" a voice rang out.

I looked up to see Sogou Ayaka walking determinedly toward the Goddess.

"This is wrong! Mimori Touka is one of our classmates!" she protested.

"Whoa, whoa! Don't be rude, Sogou!" Zakurogi said, stepping between her and the Goddess.

"You're our homeroom teacher, Zakurogi-sensei! Get ahold of yourself! It's your duty to protect the students in your care!"

"Wh-what does that matter now?! You're a smart girl, why can't you see the reality of what's happening?! There's nothing we can do to help him..." Zakurogi shot back. "A-and it's Mimori's fault anyway! He's an E-Class!"

"He didn't choose to be an E-Class! Why is everybody okay with this? We can't let her send him away to the Ruins of Disposal, or—"

"Sogou-san, S-Class, was it?" the Goddess interrupted. "You leave me no choice."

Her arms dropped, and in an instant she was standing behind Sogou.

“Atemi!”

She brought her hand down swiftly on the back of Sogou’s neck.

“Nh?!”

Sogou turned with a move that looked like it was right out of a fighting manga. Using the momentum from her turn, she parried the Goddess’s hand with her own.

Are those ancient martial arts techniques?

Sogou fell into an impressive fighting stance.

“I won’t be taken down quite that eas—ghhh!”

The Goddess’s fist struck like a hammer into Sogou’s stomach.

“The first blow was a feint. Did you really think *that* was my main attack?”

“Aah...Nggh...”

Sogou’s eyes went white as she collapsed to the ground and lay motionless.

“S-Sogou...”

I realized I was reaching out toward her. She was just doing her job as class rep, I knew that...but it still meant a lot that she’d tried to help.

At the same time, though, I never felt more pitiful and powerless than I did at that moment.

The Goddess called in a few women to load the unconscious Sogou onto a stretcher and carry her out of the room.

“She is an S-Class hero. Treat her with the utmost care, or I will subject you to a fate worse than death. Understood?”

The women nodded, terrified, and bore Sogou out of the room.

“Let us continue.”

As the Goddess resumed her ceremony, I could hear my 2-C classmates whispering among themselves.

“Sogou-san’s so kind...”

“The Goddess was kinda scary, don’t you think?”

“She took out Sogou-san in one hit...!”

“Even with moves like that, the Goddess can’t beat this Demon King guy?”

“Just how strong is he...?”

Kirihara was scowling. Oyamada had displeasure written all over his face. Even Yasu had his jaw clenched in anger.

“Everyone! Attention, please! Take a good look at this hero before he is disposed of! *This* is what comes to those without power, the losers and the dropouts! But you, *you* are the winners! Look at him with pity, and think hard about the terrible fate that awaits him!”

The Goddess urged them on.

Don’t want to end up like him? Get strong. Do your duty to me.

“Screw...you.”

Almost without realizing it, I had my arm raised and pointed at the Goddess. She raised an eyebrow and looked down at me.

“My, my.”

I held my hand out toward her, imitating the movements from when she’d burned the three-eyed wolf to a crisp. Target locked.

“P-paralyze!”

I threw my only weapon at her. I had no idea if it would work. I just...snapped. I had to do *something*. All my rage was pushed out in that one word.

“That was quite rude of you,” the Goddess said calmly. “Did you really think it would work?”

No effect.

“Aah...” My arm fell limp to my side.

“Let me put this in a way that even an E-Class hero will understand,” the Goddess said with narrowed eyes. “I keep a protective ‘Dispel Bubble’ around me at all times...which makes me completely immune to status effect spells.”

Pity. Contempt.

“And there it is. The loser hero’s final moments.”

The magic circle began to rumble.

I know it’s coming...any moment now I’m going to be teleported.

“Dragon Buster.”

A sudden surge of white. Light like a thick laser beam shot past me, barely missing my shoulder. I twitched around to see a hole open up in the wall behind me with a massive *boom!*

“Huh, looks like mine works, though.”

Kirihara had used his unique S-Class skill.

Was he trying to hit me...? I can't even tell.

“Mimori's skill was so lame, I wondered if mine was similar. But it looks like it does a lot of damage even when I'm half-assing it. Sorry I broke your wall.”

Kirihara looked down at me with disgusted indifference, like I was a gross stain he couldn't get out.

“Get out of the way already, E-Class trash.”

“—!”

I know...I can't expect anybody to go against the Goddess for me. There's nothing any of you guys can do. But...that's really the last thing you have to say to me, Kirihara? I'm your classmate, sentenced to death. And that's it?

“Amazing!” one of the hooded figures exclaimed. “Such power, and at level 1, no less! You'll be an exciting hero to watch, Kirihara-dono!”

“Huh?” Kirihara said, seeming distracted. “There's this message saying my skill level went up or something.”

“Unbelievable!” another hooded figure cried. “Leveling up after a single use?! Your stat modifiers are a sight to behold! Nothing like this pathetic E-Class hero!”

The light around me grew stronger and stronger. Time was ticking down. Tears started welling up in my eyes. I clenched my fists hard at my sides.

“What the hell...”

Oyamada started cackling.

“Oh, so the crap hero's given up already?! Ha ha ha!! That's karma for you, huh?! Shouldn't have tried to start somethin' with me on the bus! It's a shame I don't get to watch your miserable ass die,

Mimori!”

It wasn’t just tears—all kinds of emotions welled up inside me. Fear...and anger.

“Leave your worldly worries behind and enter into a peaceful sleep, Too-ka Mimori...” the Goddess said with a self-satisfied air.

I raised my head and opened my eyes.

The faces of my classmates were smug and superior, their voices mocking and abusive. They were all against me—well, maybe not everyone, but I had no time or ability to tell between friend and foe. All I saw when I opened my eyes were people looking down on me.

No...not those two. They’re not a part of this.

“What do you think, Aneki?”

“Scum. All of them.”

The Takao sisters swiftly turned on their heels and headed toward the door.

“Let’s go, Itsuki. I understand what the Goddess Vicius is trying to do, but this is all in terribly poor taste.”

“I feel bad for Mimori, but we don’t have the power to stop the Goddess now. So, like, bye! I don’t want to watch, so we’re going to the next room, ’kay?”

“Wh-where do you two think you’re going?!” one of the hooded figures called after them. The Takao sisters ignored him, so the guards started moving in their direction.

“Leave them,” the Goddess ordered.

“But Goddess—!” one of the guards protested.

“I don’t believe it’s wise to force those two to cooperate. They’re S-Class and A-Class heroes, after all. Be careful in your dealings with them...especially the S-Class.”

It’s like nothing ever gets to those two...

The Goddess turned back to me.

“Let’s get this teleportation over with, shall we? Too-ka Mimori, do you have any last words?”

Last words, huh?

I felt it melt away.

The filter I always kept up dissolved, and something I kept locked deep inside—the real Mimori Touka—welled to the surface. I'd been holding him in all this time...I lived toothless, harmless to everyone and everything. Killing myself just to get by.

But I always knew what I was doing, deep down. The real me was always in there somewhere. One side of me tried to be a good person, but the other, more violent side was always about to break free.

I had always kept my real self caged.

“...”

I'm done. Who cares anymore? Things are so bad, and yet...

Looking down, my face twisted into a wild grin.

I started to laugh.

“Screw you, foul Goddess.”

I surprised myself, but it felt...freeing.

My classmates looked shocked. The Goddess was expressionless, thick, dark pools clouding her eyes.

“I kept you in the dark out of compassion, but...if this is how you repay me, I've no reason to hold back. I have used the lowest level of the Ruins of Disposal to get rid of many strong yet unsuitable warriors over the years. Not one has emerged alive. I dispatch a scouting party to the ruins' entrance periodically to check on a secret marker that will show me if anyone has escaped...but that marker has never been activated. *No one* has ever survived the ruins.”

The Goddess smiled brightly from ear to ear.

“I hope you die in an unsightly and pitiful way, Too-ka Mimori.”

A strong, pale light consumed me.

“Compassion?” I spat. “Yeah, right. You sure didn't feel like answering my questions earlier.”

I glared at the Goddess—target acquired.

“If I ever make it back alive, you'd better be ready.”

“If you ever make it back? Ha, you're quite the jester! A last gasp befitting a disposable wretch.”

I felt strange...lightheaded. My sight faded.

I wonder if that foul Goddess can still see me.

Too-ka Mimori, disposable hero...raised his middle finger.



Chapter 2: The Ruins of Disposal

I'VE BEEN TOLD that my parents were terrible people. The abuse was constant, raising a child in that environment unthinkable, and I was warped by it.

“Little brat, always got that sad, nasty look in your eyes!” my father would scream at me, then kick me to the ground.

“I wish you were never born! We can’t even kill our own worthless kids? What’s wrong with this country?!” my mother would say.

After a while, I started thinking violent thoughts, too.

Someday... Someday I'm going to kill them.

Thinking back, it was probably just my survival instinct. There was a part of my brain that was sure one day they’d kill me, and wanted to get them first.

That’s what first brought out my dark side.

But one day, they both disappeared and left me alone.

Just...evaporated, I guess. My uncle and his wife became my foster parents. They’d gotten a call from my parents just before they vanished from my life forever.

“Take the kid.”

It was only when I started living with my foster parents that I realized that my life growing up wasn’t normal. My aunt and uncle were good people, so I wanted to be a good kid for them. I didn’t want to cause them any trouble—I owed them that much. Mimori Touka learned kindness from them. Before long, he became the air itself—someone harmless and easy to overlook.

But just before he was teleported into the dark ruins, something changed. He let *me* out.

The *real* Mimori Touka.

I opened my eyes.

I was lying on wet rock that poked into my back. I raised my head. Pitch darkness.

“So, these are the Ruins of Disposal...”

Blackness. Trapped in the deep dark. My stats...can I check them?

“Status Open.”

Vision obscured. Unable to display stats.

A monotone voice echoed the words in my head.

Okay, so I need to actually be able to see. But maybe I can use this...?

I groped in the dark until my hand hit something.

“Here it is.”

The leather pouch. My unique magic item.

I held it in both hands and ran my thumb over the crystal. I tried to remember the Goddess’s explanation.

So I need to pour mana into this thing and it’ll light up?

I thought back to what it felt like to use my skill against her and imagined pouring that power into the crystal. It began to flicker faintly in places, until the light grew and the whole thing was glowing.

Whoa, that’s awesome...it’s like I’m really using magic.

I still couldn’t see much, but in the dim light I could at least make out some of my surroundings. There was bare rock all around, and a jagged ceiling looming above. The ground was strangely bumpy and uneven.

“More of a cave than a ruin, isn’t it? Huh, what’s that...?”

I pushed myself to my feet and walked over.

“—?!”

A-a skull? Human bones?

Make that...half a skull. What happened to the other half? Something

split it in two...?

My breath caught in my throat.

What could've done this...?

There was something incredibly dangerous lurking in these ruins.

My heart raced.

Nobody survives down here—that's what the Goddess said. So I'm probably going to die down here, too. I talked a big game, but...I don't know if I can make it out of here...

I felt groggy and off, like I was still waking up and the world was still coming into focus. My head was pounding now, too, beating hard on my temples, and I could feel the sweat running down my back.

Am I gonna die? Am I really gonna die here?

That thought assaulted me. The smell of death still lingered from everyone who'd been disposed of before.

Am I going to join them?

Footsteps.

Death is coming closer.

My heart is beating out of control.

Pulse racing.

Instincts screaming.

It isn't safe here.

Survive.

You have to survive.

It was getting brighter, somehow. The skull was dyed orange by the light...

Something's there. Behind me. Something glowing orange.

"Hfff... Grrrgh... Graaah..."

A monster.

Its reek attacked my nostrils.

I could hear something dripping...something that hissed and bubbled when it hit the stone floor.

What's that sound...some kind of acid? What the hell is behind me...?

I want to know, but if I turn around now, it'll kill me.

My reason had slammed on the brakes, telling me that staying motionless was the smart move—but an instant later, my instincts took the wheel.

I ran...and tripped over my feet immediately.

As I fell, something *huge* whooshed right past my head, missing me by inches. I stumbled back to my feet and kept running, as if pushed forward by the wind of its passing.

Lucky break... Was that thing trying to hit me? Grab me?! It went right for my head!

I was sprinting at full speed, no time to look back. Every cell in my body was screaming, terrified. My teeth shook in my head.

This thing is so much stronger than me, and I can tell that it wants to kill me—I can literally feel it. Not like that Goddess—she had a presence, she was intimidating, but this thing just wants to tear me apart as soon as it can.

I realized with a shock that my pouch was still glowing—I quickly stuffed it into my uniform.

It shouldn't be able to see me now...okay, that's a plan. Hide in the darkness.

Please, just let me stay hidden...

I struggled to quiet my frantic panting. My lungs were empty, my legs numb.

I can't...I can't think straight...

No.

Don't think—just run.

I don't want to die.

My instincts took over completely. Tears welled up again as I stumbled forward—not of sadness or joy, but fear.

Or...? N-no...not fear. At least, that's not all.

I choked on my tears, trying to get enough air to run. I couldn't get a read on my own feelings—but it wasn't the first time I felt like this today.

My foot caught on something jutting out from the floor, sending

me tumbling to the ground.

F-figures...lucky I even got this far running blind.

“Haah...haah...haah...!”

I get it now...I’m not crying because I’m scared.

I turned to face the thing looming behind me.

I’m not scared.

“Screw this...”

I’m angry!

A monster stood before me—humanoid, with the head of a bull, like the Minotaur from those old Greek myths. But it was somehow more horrible than that—bloodshot golden eyes, thick orange veins crisscrossing its black-skinned, thickly muscled chest, giant horns split like a reindeer’s. There were mountainous bulges all over its body that spewed out liquid like erupting volcanoes...liquid that fizzed and spat when it dripped on the rock below.

The rock was melting.

So that was the sound I heard earlier...

It also explained the uneven rock I found when I first got here.

“Dammit...this thing’s way too fast.”

I can’t outrun it. I wonder if the Goddess could beat one of these misshapen minotaurs. Could Kirihara take it out with that blasting skill he used? The Goddess said she’d disposed of “strong but unsuitable” warriors down here...but nobody ever made it out. That monster must have killed them all.

So what chance does an E-Class like me have?

“What the hell...”

So this is it, Mimori Touka’s final moments. I wish I could at least thank my foster parents. Thank you for being so kind to me. I’d planned to say that on the day I graduated high school. I shouldn’t have waited.

Sogou Ayaka, too. I owe you my life for what you did. It isn’t close to enough, but these two words will have to do.

Thank you. Thank you for trying to help me.

Drip. Drip. Drip.

The minotaur was getting closer—my time was up.

The humans who get sent here are probably its dinner. Does it just wait here for more to get teleported in?

My nails scratched at the ground.

No weapons. One glowing leather pouch. Terrible stats. Worthless skills.

I started to get to my feet, but...stopped.

Even if I run, that minotaur can run faster. At this distance, there's no way it won't get me, and after sprinting so long I don't have the stamina to even try. Checkmate. It's over.

I closed my eyes and let my mind wander.

"Get out of the way already, E-Class trash."

"It's a shame I don't get to watch your miserable ass die, Mimori!"

"Leave your worldly worries behind and enter into a peaceful sleep, Mimori Too-ka..."

"A last gasp befitting a disposable wretch."

I opened my eyes, anger welling up inside me. They'd all gotten exactly what they wanted.

I can't go out like this... I can't.

I bit my lip.

"I want...power."

The minotaur roared. A clawed, muscled arm reached out to grab me.

I raised my arm, too, toward the monster. Two outstretched arms that could only meet in violence.

I knew that giant palm was coming to crush my skull.

I don't want to die like this. I can't give up without trying! My skill might be worthless, but...maybe I can at least get one punch in.

I don't know if it was the bubbling anger in my gut, or my survival instinct kicking into high gear. But something in me still wanted to struggle.

My unique skill—Apply Status Effect...

"P-paralyze..."

Mimori Touka's last stand...

I closed my eyes.

“...”

Several seconds ticked by...and still nothing happened.

Wait...my skull should be getting crushed to dust right about now, right?

My face dripped with sweat, and I shook with terror. Slowly, hesitantly, I raised my head and opened my eyes.

The minotaur was frozen in place.

“Huh...? It...actually worked?” The Goddess had told me that status effect spells barely even worked against low-level monsters... there was no way that minotaur was low level, right? It didn't seem weak to me...and why would there be low-level monsters at all in a place used to dispose of strong warriors?

It must've been miraculously good luck.

But then I remembered the Goddess's words.

“Even if you miraculously get one to stick, the effects are minor and the duration extremely short.”

I scrambled to my feet and ran.

I have to get away from this thing!

My time flat on the ground had given me some of my stamina back. I wasn't going to let this chance go to waste. In only a few steps, I was panting hard again.

Oh man...out of breath...is it my vitality stat...? My speed...? I bet higher-level heroes could run way farther.

I covered my mouth with my hand. I had to stop breathing so loud...

Where am I, anyway?

I scanned the dark in panic, checking behind me.

I don't see it. Did I get away?

“...”

My legs hurt—I was exhausted. I leaned forward to inspect my ankles and knees by touch.

No sprains...I don't think. I can rest a while, right? Then I'll start looking for a way to the surface...there's got to be—

“Uh.”

I looked up, and froze.

How could I have been so stupid? There's more than one of them...

That place I just came from must've been the minotaur's territory. Of course if I leave it I'll run into something else.

“Bwaa-aak! Bwaaak! Bwaaaak!”

What the hell is that...? Some kind of bird monster? A cockatrice?!

The head was birdlike, with a big crest on top—or maybe a horn? Its scrawny neck shook violently. Below that, it looked like a four-armed humanoid, with jet-black skin crossed with orange veins, just like the minotaur. Instead of hands, it had massive claws.

The sounds it kept making were strange and only vaguely birdlike. Thick acid oozed from holes in its body to fizz on the ground.

One birdlike eye swiveled in its socket to stare down at me as it squalled its strange bird sounds. Something dripped from its maw—saliva? Did that mean it was hungry?

“Bwaaaa-waaaaak!” it cried, high-pitched and eerie. Its clawed arms moved like pistons as it approached.

Even one hit from those claws will probably be fatal. Can I run for it...? No, it's no use. At least I noticed the minotaur before it was right in front of me—this thing is even faster.

I would've begged to fight Kirihara and the others instead—I'd face that Dragonic Buster any day of the week. Evil and cruel were no match for the pure, unadulterated bloodlust I sensed from these things.

Were they trying to kill me for food? For their own survival? Or were they just twisted creatures who didn't have a problem with murder? No matter the reason, I could tell they *wanted* to kill me. The bird-head thing was just as strong as the minotaur, if not stronger. I'd jumped out of the frying pan, into the fire.

All the warriors and heroes who'd been sent here...they must have all died like this. Someone strong might be able to take out one, but the next wouldn't be far behind. There were probably *countless* monsters down here. Finally, even the strongest fighter would reach the limits of

their stamina and willpower.

No... I don't want to die.

I don't want to die...

I don't want to die!

I unconsciously raised my hand.

So this is what it's like to pray...

"Para...lyze."

"Bwa—aa—aah—"

I opened my eyes, and my jaw dropped.

I guess I haven't used up my supply of miracles yet.

"It worked...again?"

The bird-headed monster looked like it was straining, sweat trickling down its bird face. But it remained completely motionless.

Paralysis. It worked again.

Praying that those four arms didn't suddenly jump back into motion, I slipped past the monster and ran away at a full sprint. A theory came to me, like a revelation.

It can't be.

But...

Maybe this miracle is bigger than I realized. What if my skill worked twice because...it always works? I used a status effect on a monster twice in these supposedly unbeatable ruins. And the minotaur hasn't come after me. Neither has bird-head. What if...the "Status Effect" skill the Goddess talked about and my ability are...completely different things? Maybe my skill always hits. Maybe it lasts a long time.

"If that's true, then..." I turned back to the paralyzed bird-head I'd left behind.

"I might just make it out of here."

My thoughts raced—was this really possible? Could I really make it out?

I'm getting ahead of myself. First, I need to check something.

I slipped into the shallow opening in the rock I'd found earlier. The light of the leather pouch was fading, so I poured a little more

mana into it, and it started to glow faintly again.

Good—at least I can see now.

“Status open!”

Ok. Here it is.

Too-ka Mimori

Level 1

HP: +3 MP: +1 / 33

Attack: +3 Defense: +3 Vitality: +3

Speed: +3 Intelligence: +3

Title: E-Class Hero

As expected, my mana was running low. I’d used Paralyze three times—once on the Goddess, once on the minotaur, and once on bird-head...so that was 10 MP per use? The other two mana must be what I put in the leather pouch.

This is bad...I’m basically out of mana already.

I thought through everything the Goddess had told me. Maybe that wasn’t exactly true—she’d said that our listed stats were actually stat *modifiers*. So I’m out of extra mana...but the real amount of mana I have left depends on my natural abilities, the mana inside me that can’t be described in numbers.

But there’s no way of telling how much I have left...if it’s under ten, I still can’t use my skills again...

My only weapon, useless.

Checkmate.

Not knowing how much mana I had left to work with was stressful, but it beat being sure I was dead. Shaking off my fear, I flicked over to the skill page.

Unique Skill: Apply Status Effect / Available for use

And again.

Paralyze: Level 1 / Mana cost: 10 MP

Sleep: Level 1

Poison: Level 1

So I have to use the skill at least once to see its mana cost...?

"I'm done for."

I held my head in my hands. It was hopeless. There was no way my mana would last until I reached the surface.

Does it regenerate over time? Maybe when I go to sleep like in an RPG? But even if it did, that's an extra—what? Thirty mana? I'm an E-Class, I can't count on having much natural mana inside me.

And what happens if I run out of mana? Do I pass out? That would mean using my own mana at all is risky.

Wait.

When Kirihara used his Dragonic Buster skill, he'd mentioned something about his skill level increasing...so we can level up, just like in a game.

"If I can level up high enough, maybe I can make it..." My maximum mana might increase, or the mana cost of my skills might go down.

As an E-Class, however, I'd probably grow slowly. That's what the Goddess said, at least. S-Class heroes like Kirihara leveled up much faster. He got enough EXP to level up his unique skill after just one use, but I'd used mine three times and hadn't leveled once.

So that's the difference between an E-Class and an S-Class, huh? But in games, you usually only get experience when you kill the monsters...

I glanced back at my list of skills.

"Poison, huh?" That was the only one that looked like it did any damage.

Or maybe the other heroes left some weapons behind that I could use? If I found a sword or something, I could use it to kill the paralyzed monsters.

As a regular person my stats weren't great to begin with, and my E-Class stat modifiers clearly sucked. But if I could find a decent weapon, there might be a chance. I had to hope that other heroes were allowed weapons, same as the Goddess giving me my shoddy little pouch.

I stuck my head out of my hiding place and looked back towards bird-head.

"I wonder how long this paralysis thing is gonna last? I should go back and check." I'd get some important information that way. If the monster was still paralyzed when I got there, that meant the spell had a pretty long duration. That would make standing there with a weapon and hacking at it until it died a more realistic plan.

But if I get back and the monster's not there anymore...

"I'll cross that bridge when I come to it."

I could see a small light at the end of the tunnel—I started to walk towards it.

Take the risk. Just be prepared for the worst.

Maybe this was a bad idea. It might've been smarter to keep pushing on toward the surface, but...I wanted to know. I'd run frantically the moment I realized the paralysis had stuck, so I wasn't even sure how far I'd have to backtrack. Maybe it was hiding in the darkness, just waiting for a chance to strike.

My eyes were starting to adjust to the dark, and I could see dim shapes in the blackness. There, on the ground—

"An axe?"

Did some past hero drop this?

I'd been moving so fast that I must've run right past it. I picked it up—it felt heavy in my hands.

I wonder if it's still sharp.

There was one MP left on my stat modifier. I considered feeding it into the leather pouch to light it up enough to check the stats on the axe, but no...not just yet. Bird-head's creepy orange veins glowed enough that I'd be able to see when I got close.

I held it in one hand and kept walking. My chest hurt. My throat was dry.

That bird...it's still out there somewhere in the darkness...

Finally, I caught a glimpse of the orange glow. As I drew closer, I realized it was still paralyzed right where I'd left it.

Unless it's just faking it...trying to lure me in.

“Bwa-aa-aak!”

It clearly still wanted me dead. I'd done something to it, and now it couldn't move—it seemed to at least understand that. That thick acid still oozed from the holes in its body.

So the paralysis doesn't stop all bodily functions, then. I guess if it worked like that, it'd be essentially an instant kill...huh, what's that? A gauge?

There was a yellow gauge hovering just above its head, looking exactly like something out of a video game. If the yellow bar measured the effect duration like I guessed, it was about half over.

I stepped away from the monster, grabbed a stone off the ground, and pitched it as hard as I could at its back.

Klunk!

It made contact, but that wasn't the sound you'd expect to hear from a stone hitting skin...it must have had very hard skin, at least. I hid and peeked back out at the monster—luckily, it was still frozen in place. I'd played RPGs back in my world where a status effect wore off when the character took damage, but luckily it didn't seem to work like that here. I could do whatever I wanted to the enemy until the gauge ran out.

“Yes!” Without even noticing I did a little fist-pump of triumph in the air.

I stepped out from my hiding place and inspected my axe in the orange glow of the monster. It looked like it was in pretty good shape, not chipped or anything.

“Eat this, bird-head!”

I raised the axe above my head with both hands. I figured I'd start with the limbs—I swung it down hard like a lumberjack at one of its arms.

Klank!

The impact sent a shockwave through my arms—a dull, heavy

pain followed as I let the axe drop from my fingers. The monster looked exactly the same.

It's no use. It's just too tough.

Catching my breath, I looked down at the axe where it had landed. There was a long crack in the blade now.

“Oh...”

Before I could reach down to pick it up, I saw that it had landed in a pool of bird-head's acid—the axe blade had already begun to melt, the acid eating through the metal way faster than it had the stone floor. The weapon was totally useless to me now.

“What am I supposed to do? Is this thing even beatable...?”

What if I jam a blade into one of those holes? No... It'd just melt away.

There's only one thing I can think of that might work.

I'd have to use my own mana—the mana I couldn't see—to cast Poison on bird-head. I walked over slowly and raised my arm. *Target acquired.*

“Haah...”

Deep breath. Stay calm.

“P-poison...”

The monster's whole body seemed to *blur*, then turn purple. Translucent purple foam started to form on the creature's body, like little soap bubbles all over its skin that popped and melted away into the air.

So this is the poison effect...I did it. It worked. Other than that one failed attack on the foul Goddess, I've had a 100% hit rate.

The paralysis had left bird-head frozen in an odd half-standing position. The yellow gauge had drained more, but there was no other change—I'd expected a purple gauge to appear next to the yellow one.

“...”

I'd been lucky again—casting poison on a monster could've overwritten paralysis, but thankfully, the effects stacked.

Okay, combo complete. The paralysis-poison one-two punch. I can do this...!

It was *exhilarating*.

Now all I have to do is wait. Wait...and pray. And if the monster dies from the poison damage, maybe I'll level up.

I could only hope that it *would* die from poison—I'd played games where poison effects couldn't deal the final blow, they'd just bring a monster down to 1 HP and you'd need to physically finish them off.

What kind of damage is poison, anyway? Is it a fixed amount, or does it scale with the strength of the monster? Does it deal a certain amount every tick, or a percentage of the enemy's health? That could really affect how useful it's going to be...

"Bwaaak... Bwaak... Bwah..." The creature's cries grew weaker and weaker.

So is it a fixed amount of damage, or a percentage?

It could be an incredibly high amount of fixed damage.

Whatever kind of damage it was doing, the monster was clearly getting weaker. Sweat dripped down my forehead as my mouth turned up in a manic grin, a mix of joy and hope.

"I might be able to kill them."

Every last monster.

I sat cross-legged on the ground and waited for the monster to die. The yellow bar of the gauge got shorter and shorter as bird-head weakened under the poison's effects. I kept my eyes glued to that gauge, knowing that the moment it ran out, the paralysis would wear off.

I have to stack it again before it runs out...

Stack it again before it runs out...

Stack it again before it runs out...

I muttered it to myself over and over like *they* were the real magic words.

"Speaking of magic..."

I'd been so caught up thinking about poison and paralysis that I'd forgotten all about my mana. I opened my stats screen.

MP: +0/33

My stat modifier for mana was spent.

What's gonna happen if I keep using my skills...?

Dizziness and lightheadedness, then eventually passing out—that kind of thing happened all the time in manga when a character used too much mental energy.

I have to avoid that at all costs. Being unconscious in a place like this would be a death sentence.

I looked bird-head straight in its bulging eyes.

“Hey, don’t look at me like that. You tried to kill me, right? And I can still sense how badly you want to rip me to shreds.”

You tried to kill me. I’m trying to kill you. It’s just survival.

Serves you right.

Die.

Die.

Die.

I could feel my time in the dark changing me—driving me out of my mind. I could feel this place chipping away at my compassion and reason.

Murder is wrong. I know that...but if I don’t murder this thing, it’ll kill me. I have to kill to stay alive. Senseless murder is evil, I know that...but this is different. I have a good reason for taking a life here. Survival of the fittest.

Kill or die.

But...what do I mean by “here”? These ruins? This world?

I shook my head. Who’d care about philosophy at a time like this? I only needed to focus on one thing—making sure the monster in front of me died.

“...”

I waited a long time, watching in silence and praying for this creature’s death.

This could really start messing with my head.

I got to my feet, grabbing a sharp rock off the floor as I stood, and tried to crush the bird’s eye with it. It didn’t work. Its eye was covered

with a thin, hard layer of mucus.

More time passed. The gauge was almost empty.

Paralyze is about to wear off... Time to use it again.

“Paralyze.”

Error: Duplicate skill—cannot apply twice.

“Huh...?”

It won’t stack?

Oh...it’ll probably only work once the first effect wears off. I’ll need to target it with another Paralyze as soon as it gets free of the first one.

I...I’d better be fast. This thing might charge at me as soon as it can move.

I raised my arm.

Almost...time...

The yellow gauge disappeared.

“Bwaaaaak!”

“Paralyze!”

The monster began spinning its arms, testing its new freedom.

“It...didn’t work?”

That can’t be...

“No...”

Am I out of mana?

Error: Duplicate skill—cannot apply to the same target twice.

No, it’s not that! I can’t paralyze the same target twice! Even after the effect wears off, I can’t reapply the same effect.

I took a step back. The monster took one heavy step towards me. The purple poison bubbles were still active—that much was clear—but the situation was dire.

Paralyze isn't going to work anymore... What do I do? Wait...stay calm. I have another skill.

“S-s-sleep!”

“B-bwak?”

The monster staggered back, its eyes falling closed immediately. Its lumbering black body swayed and fell forward with a loud crash.

“It worked...?” This time, a blue gauge appeared over the monster's head. Using a different skill *was* possible, at least.

Sweat rolled down my face as I drew a shaky breath.

I can do this.

If I alternated using sleep and paralysis, I could keep the combo going for as long as my mana held out.

Okay, next I need to check whether I can put paralysis back on it before sleep wears off. Poison's still working—maybe it's a whole different system from the other status effect skills?

I wiped my forehead with the back of my hand. I was sweating heavily.

Am I sweating this much because I'm using my own mana...?

I looked down at the bird-headed monster. It seemed like it was still getting weaker. Purple bubbles still grew and popped on its skin.

Paralyze, Poison and Sleep... Those three skills are going to get me out of here.

I was still panting hard. But after a moment the sound of my breathing got strange...

“Huh?”

That's not me!

I turned.

“Grrrgh!”

“Aah!”

It was the minotaur. Its paralysis spell had worn off, so it must've come looking for me, golden eyes narrowed in rage. The minotaur closed in on me.

I can't use the same skill on the same target twice in a row, so...

“S-sleep!”

“Graah...?”

The minotaur collapsed with a thud. A blue gauge appeared above its head.

I was panting even harder, and I’d started to feel lightheaded.

This isn’t good. So, what now? Do I use my own mana to poison this mino-guy?

“I don’t really have a choice...”

I looked down at the collapsed bull-headed monster, my heart empty.

Kill the enemy. No compassion. Not for this thing that was about to—what’s that sound?

Heavy footsteps, and the hiss of melting rock.

“You’ve got to be kidding me.”

All around me, specks of gold and ropey orange lines of light appeared out of the darkness.

“Bwaaak! Bwaak! Bwaaa-aaak!”

“Grrrraaaagh!”

A chorus of minotaur and bird-head sounds rang in my ears.

I guess the minotaur brought some friends.

“Gimme a break...how many more of these things are there?”

Sweat ran down my face and soaked the collar of my uniform. I smiled, mind racing in strange directions to escape the reality of what was happening.

That acid stuff is melting the floor—is the point to make it bumpy so it’s hard to run away?

Minotaurs in front of me, bird-heads behind—I was cornered. I was out of the MP I could use safely, and my stats were too pathetic to count on. I stared up at the ceiling.

Isn’t this the part of the story where somebody swoops in and saves me at the last moment? Some super strong hero who’s still alive down here should be coming to my rescue—a real warrior living in these caves in secret.

Of course not.

I tried my best. I did everything I could, didn't I? If this were a manga, I'd be one of the characters who dies in the prologue.

Air.

E-Class.

Disposable hero.

"I hope you die in an unsightly and pitiful way, Too-ka Mimori."

That foul Goddess.

"Wh-what the hell..."

I backed up against the rock wall and clenched my fists.

Nobody's coming to save me. Nobody cares enough about a background character like me to even try. That's why I have to save myself. Don't rely on anyone. Don't expect anything of them. Don't cling to them. The hero you were dreaming about isn't coming to save you—he's already here. You have to become him.

I'll annihilate every single one of them.

Background character? E-Class? Rock bottom? Sure, bring it on. I'll survive in the harshest conditions, resist and rise up like a weed. I'll bet everything on my own capabilities. I'll keep going until I use my status effects on every last one of you, or my MP runs out. Whichever comes first.

My eyes darted left and right. I raised both hands and took aim at the first monsters in the horde.

"P-paralyze!"

"Bwaah—"

The first monster in front of me stopped dead in its tracks.

Paralysis successful.

I felt dizzy, light-headed, but stood firm. Sweat rolled down my cheeks.

"Haah...haah...ha ha ha haa! Come and get it!"

I smirked at the horde before me. It was time for survival of the fittest.

"Let's do this."

Chapter 3: The Road to Annihilation

“PARALYZE, PARALYZE, Paralyze, Paralyze, Paralyze, Para-lyze!”

That was, what, eight of them? I felt strangely giddy. The paralyzed bodies around me became shields protecting me from the rest, buying me time to fire off more skills before the still-mobile monsters could break through.

“Paralyze!”

“Uh...whoa...” It felt like my blood was being pulled out of my body through the top of my head.

I probably don't have much mana left. This is bad... I-I'm going to pass out... How many more of them are there...?

“Bwaaak!”

Another bird-head... I steeled myself and raised my arm once more.

“Paralyze!”

“Bwaa—”

It froze, but that moment I stumbled to the side, my world turning white. I tried to stay focused on the monsters around me...

“What the hell...”

Reinforcements had arrived, marching into my field of vision. Five more, coming from all directions...and even more beyond them?

This was really, *really* bad.

“...”

I don't quite know why, but...I began to laugh.

“Heh, if this is how you're gonna play it, then...”

I'll use every last drop.

I could barely stay on my feet. My mind was fading, grasping onto consciousness through sheer force of will.

“C'mon, come and get me...!”

Every last drop.

“I’ll stop fighting when I drop dead! Paralyze! Paralyze! Paralyze! Paralyze! Pa...ra...”

I felt something snap inside me. My body swayed dangerously.

I guess that was the end of the MP.

My legs wouldn’t hold me up. I could feel my consciousness being sucked under.

“I guess my mind gave out first...heh...no, wait...I can...one more...if this is the end...then...*one more*...”

I raised my trembling hand.

Last one...

“I’ll...show them...what a background character can do... Mimori Tou-”

My last moment alive...

“Bwa! Bwaaanng...”

What was that? Sounded like...a monster’s last cry of agony before it...died...

Level up!

Instantly, my energy returned. My mind cleared, vivid and focused.

Level 1 → Level 258

Wh-what was that? What just happened?

“Paralyze!”

Why?

The leaping minotaur froze in mid-air.

“Paralyze! Paralyze! Paralyze—!”

Why did my level increase?

“Oh.”

I spared a glance for the original bird-head, lying face down. The first monster I'd poisoned had finally breathed its last.

I remembered the hooded figure saying that I would grow slowly, that I'd need a ton of experience to level up. So the monsters in the Ruins of Disposal must provide an enormous EXP gain.

You're probably not meant to be able to kill them at all.

When I first encountered the minotaur and bird-head, they'd both moved slowly and deliberately. They'd underestimated me and paid the price. If they'd recognized me as a threat right off, they could've killed me before I had a single chance to use my skills. But they let their guards down, sure that I was too weak to worry about.

Trash like that wouldn't even take ten percent of my strength to crush.

Does my MP regenerate when I level up? Do I only get half back, or a full bar? Do I only gain the new mana from my stat modifier?

If I keep targeting these monsters—keep leveling up, then...

“I can keep fighting! Paralyze!”

I can do this. By the skin of my teeth...I'm gonna pull this off!

“Paralyze! Paralyze! Paralyze!”

Skill level up!

Level 1 → Level 2

Nice, that's probably for Paralyze.

It seemed that skill EXP and level EXP were separate, and I had to use a skill a certain number of times to level it up...? Even after my level shot up, I didn't seem to gain any new skills—I had no way to figure out how to get more of them.

“First, I need to focus on getting out of here...!”

Using my mana was totally intuitive, luckily. And as I looked out at the monsters, another revelation struck me.

“Whoa, no way... I can already do that...?”

Multiple targets.

A triangle mark appeared above the heads of all the monsters in my field of view. I raised my arm...

“Paralyze.”

They stopped in unison. *Paralysis successful.*

Maybe the Goddess is the only one my skills can't affect.

Since I was sent to the ruins, they hadn't failed me yet—a 100% success rate.

I laughed menacingly.

“So there it is. If just one gave me that much EXP...if I kill every single one, I'll be *drowning* in it! Hah!”

While the other monsters were shoving their way through the paralyzed crowd, I used another skill on the motionless creatures spread out before me.

“Poison, Poison, Poison, Poison, Poison, Poison, Poison, Poison—”

Skill level up!

Level 1 → Level 2

These monsters just look like walking, oozing experience points to me now.

I backed up to the wall and sank to sit on the floor. Monsters lay motionless in front of me, slowly having their lives drained away by the poison.

“How many of these things were living down here...?”

The paralyzed creatures formed a disorganized semi-circle around me. New monsters pushed the others out of their way, acid erupting from the holes in their bodies.

Fresh prey.

The eyes of the frozen, sickly, bubbling things pierced me as I watched.

“As soon as I can move again, I'm going to murder you,” they seemed

to say.

“Just try it,” I said, glaring right back. “I’ll kill you before you get the chance.”

My skin felt tight, tingling.

For some reason, the monsters’ murderous looks filled me with a strange sense of relief. Maybe all this hate aimed at me made it easier to kill them without mercy.

I couldn’t look them in the eyes for too long—keeping an eye on their gauges was more important. And maybe this was a chance to learn something new about my skills—I had a lot of theories to test out.

Does the poison deal the same damage every time, or is it somewhat random?

I couldn’t test that now—I needed to stay focused and prepared to cast Sleep if it was needed.

Huh...I still haven’t checked if I can stack paralysis and sleep on the same target. That would be good to know now. But first, I’d better check how much MP I have left.

“Status Open.”

Too-ka Mimori

Level 258

HP: +774 MP: +8194 / 8514

Attack: +774 Defense: +774 Vitality: +774

Speed: +774 Intelligence: +774

Title: E-Class Hero

Well, my stat modifiers had definitely gotten better.

3 times 258 is 774...so they’re multiplied by my level.

And since my starting MP value was actually decent, my mana was much higher—a huge relief, since my mana was my only lifeline down here.

So, did the MP I used on skills recover when I leveled up?

I didn’t know what to make of the other stat modifiers, though. If

Oyamada's vitality was +500 at level 1, maybe mine weren't as good as they looked.

Well, at least I feel like I got some stamina back after leveling up.

"Grraa...nngh..."

Somewhere, a minotaur breathed its last.

Level up!

Level 258 → Level 277

I waited a while longer. Another minotaur gasped and wheezed out its final breath—then another, then another...

Level up!

Level 277 → Level 321

More time passed. Other than the first bird-head I'd poisoned, only minotaurs had died so far—the bird-headed monsters must've had a lot more HP.

"Bwaaak! Bwa..."

"Oh?"

Finally, it happened.

Level up!

Level 321 → Level 395

"Looks like the bird-head ones give better EXP."

Unfortunately, I couldn't see any detailed information about experience points on my stat display. There was no "this much EXP to the next level" marker like you see in a lot of games.

It sucks to play a stamina-based game and not get to use all your mana before a level-up. It feels like a waste if you're going to be back at full MP at the next level anyway. Huh...maybe knowing what it's like to be poor

made me more sensitive to this stuff.

“Anyway...”

I opened my stats to check my mana.

MP: +13035 / 13035

Completely restored, like I thought. My skills cost 10 MP to use, so I can use them 1303 times. And there are still monsters alive here—once they die, I should level up again. If I can stack effects on all of them...

“I could farm them for skill experience.”

I locked on to one of the bird-headed monsters and raised my hand.

“Sleep.”

It didn’t fall since it was still paralyzed where it stood, but its eyes closed.

“It works. Sleep and Paralyze stack.”

Two gauges were now displayed above the monster, yellow and blue—Paralyze and Sleep. Now even when the Paralyze gauge wore off, I wouldn’t need to reapply sleep right away. That moment of risk when the monsters could move around was gone—my combo was flawless. The Poison effect continued to bubble.

Now I can farm them for skill experience with all this excess mana. With the amount of EXP they’re giving out, I should level up at least a few more times.

No need to hold back, then...

“Sleep! Sleep, Sleep, Sleep, Sleep, Sleep—”

I walked around to each paralyzed monster, stacking the effect on them.

“Sleep, Sleep—”

Skill Level Up!

Level 1 → Level 2

There it is. Now Sleep is level 2 as well.

The monsters around me croaked their last, one after another.

Level up!

Level 395 → Level 501

“That’s about all the Sleep I can stack...”

Looking at the numbers, I was sadly letting a large amount of mana go to waste. But considering I almost died when I ran out of MP earlier, I couldn’t complain too much about having extra.

The minotaurs outside my protective paralyzed circle glared at me one more time, then a few turned and withdrew into the caves.

“Did they give up on killing me...?”

Suddenly, the bird-headed monsters all opened their mouths wide as if in fear.

“B-bwaaaaak!”

In one motion, they flocked together and ran, their four arms flapping like wings against the rock.

“Bwaa-kk!”

They thought they were getting an easy meal, but then their buddies were frozen in place, turned purple and sickly, and eventually died. Makes sense that they’d realize this human is too risky to fight.

They might be monsters in the Ruins of Disposal, but they’re still living things, then—they value their lives.

I gazed after the retreating horde.

“What do I do now?” I asked myself. “Chase them down and kill them?”

No, not now. Not that I’m feeling particularly compassionate or anything...but my goal is to reach the surface, and I’ve probably leveled up enough for that. Next, I need to explore and get my bearings.

Standing up slowly, I looked in the direction the minotaurs had fled. I hadn’t been able to properly search the place where I was first teleported in—there might’ve been something useful there. I’d only seen

that one half-skull before the minotaur's attack distracted me from searching for loot.

"No harm in going to check." There could be all kinds of stuff left by those other discarded warriors.

I can't let my guard down, though—a surprise attack or an ambush could finish me off before I get a chance to use any of my status effects. Without them, those monsters could probably kill me in a single hit. That Goddess has probably sent S-Class heroes down here before, so I doubt my E-Class stats will do me any good, even after gaining all those levels.

So I always need to make the first move. I can't get hit, no matter what. That's all I need to focus on—not getting hit.

I made it back to my starting point, still organizing my thoughts. I raised my illuminated pouch.

Right now, darkness is more dangerous to me than light—even if it attracts their attention, I can't hit what I can't see.

Well...as long as nothing down here has a projectile weapon.

"I don't see anything useful down here..."

I did find a bunch of human bones half-dissolved by acid, probably killed by a minotaur. There were a few weapons, but they'd mostly been ruined by the acid, too—they'd just be dead weight I'd have to carry.

"Guess this is it. Hunh."

I'd managed to find a black overcoat on one of the skeletons and a rusted-but-intact shortsword. I gratefully wrapped the warm coat around my shoulders to shut out the cold of the cave; then I took the shortsword from its leather scabbard and checked the blade. I wasn't sure it'd be much use, but it looked functional enough, so I jammed it into my leather pouch. I had to hold the pouch in my left hand to keep my right free for skills. I'd found that they only worked if I locked onto a target by pointing at it, so I needed the free hand.

It was hard to imagine the shortsword hurting one of those monsters, but maybe it would come in handy for defense? The reverberation when I'd tried to cut bird-head's monstrously tough hide had traumatized me a little.

Soon I caught sight of the magic circle carved into the rocks that I'd arrived on.

“This magic circle thing...I doubt I can use it, right?” I had to assume that only the foul Goddess could make them work, otherwise prisoners would always just go right back through.

“...”

I wonder what my classmates are doing now... No. Don't think about them. Think about all the danger you're in. About how to survive, and how to get to the surface, any way you can.

I started a more thorough search of the cave, even returning to the battlefield I'd just left. The mountain of monster corpses remained, of course, untouched.

“Now that I see them all laid out like this...there sure are a lot of them.” It felt like the battle had happened in a past life. I peered forward into the cave the bird-heads had retreated through.

“Time to try a new direction.”

I came out of the tunnel into a wide open cavern, too large to illuminate with my leather pouch. The ceiling was high, with jagged stalactites hanging down like you'd see in a limestone cave.

Grrrgh...grrr...

I was trying to ignore it, but my stomach won't let me...I'm starving. Thirsty, too. I haven't eaten since before I got on the bus.

Sprinting around escaping monsters and battling them to the death really worked up a sweat. I'd lost a lot of liquid. I'd kept an eye open for a puddle or water source on the way here, but no luck yet.

First obstacle: monsters...cleared. Next up: food and water.

Monsters were one thing, but food and water were a more fundamental problem.

“Nothing I can do but keep going...”

Do those monsters eat and drink? Maybe I can find their food source.

I walked slowly through the expanding dark.

The Runaway

THE WOOD WAS lush and deep. Warm sunlight dappled the cool forest floor and danced on the ripples on the surface of the water.

A girl stood bathing, completely naked, knee-deep in the river. The sun shone down on her through the trees, making her silken, milky white skin sparkle. She was thin, but not too thin, and her long white-blond hair was damp and clung to her round, voluptuous breasts. She gently pulled it back and tucked it behind an ear.

Have all these sleepless nights of running brought me any further from harm...?

She'd finally thrown off her overly persistent pursuers, and this forest would make a good hiding place. Hermits would throw away all their worldly cares to make the forest their home, so why couldn't she? Although the girl hadn't been raised here, she'd spent enough time exploring its twists and turns to be sure she could stay undetected here for a while.

The water was warm and welcome against her skin. Taking a wet cloth in one hand, she began to wash herself. It was her first true bath in quite some time. Washing away the bad and becoming clean and pure again felt good, like running through a cool breeze. She couldn't remember the last time she'd had a chance to bathe—not since she'd been forced into the harsh life of a runaway. Her clear blue eyes shone with sorrow.

When will I be able to rest again...? How long will this go on?

A soft wind swept through the trees, lightly carressing her naked form. Above her, the cloudless sky stretched out for miles above the rustling leaves, but her heart was grey, heavy with rain.



Mimori Touka

I KEPT WALKING. Everything looked the same.

I found a path that appeared to lead upward, but it just took me past more of the same kinds of caves and rocks I'd been seeing for hours now.

At least it *felt* like hours...I was feeling faint and tired.

“...”

How long has it actually been? It sure feels like a long time, but I can't tell down here.

No clocks, no sun to rise—just monotonous dark. My sense of time felt broken.

Grrrgh...grrrgh...

“Haah, Haah...”

I can level up and improve my stats, but I'm still going to get hungry. Hell, I'm hungry now. But that's not even the main problem...I desperately need water, and soon.

“Haah... Haah...”

The soles of my shoes, like my nerves, were slowly being worn away.

Have to stay alert...monsters could be around any corner. Can't space out...

Walk.

What was that?

Walk. Walk.

Nothing...

Walk. Walk. Walk.

There's nothing down here. Just rocks. Rocks, rocks and more rocks. Oh, and rocks. Did I mention rocks?

They all looked the same.

What's a rock, anyway? What's the difference between a rock and a boulder? How about mountains... how big does it have to be to count as a mountain?

I'm underground... Is it still a mountain if it's underground...?

"..."

My mind was in a bad place.

Extreme hunger. Extreme thirst. Who knew it'd be this hard? I'm not even seeing monsters anymore. I'd kill them if I did. Food. Meat. I don't care what it is. Somebody, please. Give me something to eat.

"Oh yeah..."

There were monster corpses on the lower levels.

"Maybe I could eat them."

My voice cracked from lack of water as I told the emptiness my idea. I turned back—I had a bad feeling that the empty, identical terrain stretching before me might just continue forever.

But I did know one place where there would definitely be food. Minotaur corpses are basically beef, right? And I bet bird-head meat tastes like chicken.

I can make it there. I have to.

I trudged the long road back to the battlefield I'd left behind. I wasn't even sweating anymore when I got there.

Water...blood? Can I drink their blood?

I took out my shortsword, held it in my off hand and...stopped.

"Hang on..."

I poisoned them all to death...are they okay to eat? The poison wore off, right? They're not bubbly or purple anymore. As long as I can actually cut them up, it should be fine to eat them. I can eat them...please let me eat them...

I set aside my leather pouch. Leaving my left hand free for using skills, I gripped the sword in my right.

Minotaur... Beef...

My hand gripped tight around the hilt of my sword.

The hide's probably too tough to cut through, even if it's dead. I should

try near the head, somewhere with less muscle.

I dug in and gouged out one of the eyeballs.

This might work...?

I looked dubiously into the eye socket...could I get some meat out of there? I swallowed.

I have to try. Just...push down how disgusting this is, there's no room to be squeamish.

I need food and water, or I'll die.

Okay. First, jam the blade into the eye socket...

Pssssh!

"Whoa...?! Aah!"

I jumped back. Acid spurted out of the eyehole—the entire corpse was full of it. There was no way I could eat that.

"..."

I glanced down at the eyeball that had fallen on the rock next to me.

Maybe I can eat it...?

I'm gonna die. I need it.

I gingerly picked the eyeball up and bit into it.

Pssssh!

"Gaaanngh!"

It was filled with acid. I coughed and spat over and over.

It's like their whole bodies are filled with this stuff—harmless to them but poison to their prey.

I furiously wiped my mouth on my uniform—it felt like the inside of my mouth had melted a little.

I sighed deeply.

I was lucky I didn't swallow any. It burned, but there wasn't much I could do about that without water.

The damage didn't seem too bad, at least—it might've been my defense stat doing the heavy lifting.

I made my way suspiciously toward the nearest bird-head

monster. I tried the same thing, with predictable results—it wasn't edible.

Figures. They send people here to die, right? If you could kill and eat the monsters, surviving down here would be much simpler. There's no way the Goddess would make it that easy. I'm sure this was part of her plan—even if someone manages to beat the minotaurs and the bird-heads, their own primal needs will get them before long.

“The Ruins of Disposal... No survivors, huh?”

The monsters must eat something, though...and they must have a water source somewhere. If I can find that...

I shook my head. This was another world. I couldn't rely on my world's logic here.

But if they don't need food and water...that's my last hope crushed. Maybe they don't kill humans for food? Maybe hunting is just a game for them—hunting for sport, like we'd play a video game.

“...”

I stopped walking.

What do I do? Head back to the desert? There's nothing there. Back to the start, to track the minotaurs and bird-heads who ran away from me? No, fighting them while I'm in this condition is too dangerous. I might not get my skills off in time.

I felt weak, like my head was hollowed out and empty.

“That's right...gotta pick up my bag...”

I looked down blankly at my light-up leather pouch.

“Huh...?”

The glowing crystal on my pouch...it looked different, somehow.
It used to be more lime-green, didn't it?

I remembered it being a pale green color, maybe. But now, the bottom of the crystal glowed purple.

I rubbed my eyes.

Am I starting to see things? Was it always this color?

I thought back to when the foul Goddess first handed it to me. It definitely wasn't purple at that point.

Did I poison my pouch somehow by mistake...? Nah, that can't be it.

"Ah—"

As I inspected the pouch, the light got fainter. I put my hands on the crystal and poured more mana into the pouch—as much as I could, before hunger took away the strength I needed to use mana at all.

"Huh?"

The purple patch grew.

Is this...some sort of gauge? Does it fill up when I pour mana into it?

My exhausted mind raced.

My level's so high that I have a stupid amount of mana. More than enough.

I didn't fully understand what I was doing. Maybe walking past all those rocks had actually melted my brain. But I just wanted to see something happen. Something, anything different.

I'll leave enough mana to use a bunch of skills—100 times should be enough.

I started pouring mana into the pouch's crystal.

Even if I'm sitting here and the only difference is that my crystal's purple now, that'd be something...

After several minutes, the crystal turned completely purple—the gauge was full. It glowed with a strong, dazzling light. I felt a strange sense of satisfaction with what I'd done.

"Pfaa haah...hah..." I choked out a parched laugh.

Why am I laughing, anyway?

I forced my tired legs to stand.

Time to go...I can still move, right? I probably won't make it back to that desert area, though. I'll have to find where those minotaurs ran off to. Walk until my legs give out. If I try my hardest and it's not enough, at least I'll know I did everything I could. There are still things I can do here! I turned that crystal purple, didn't I?!

I can still change things.

You knew what you were getting yourself into. This place is hell. Writhe. Struggle. Until the very end.

Until your heart stops beating.

Disposed hero, Mimori Touka.

“Heh, I’m not giving up that easily... Pfah hah hah...”

For some strange reason, I started laughing.

At least things are getting interesting again. Has the hunger started messing with my head?

I walked a few meters, then stopped. Something was wrong.

“Wh-what...?” I lurched forward, then frantically looked in all directions.

Is it an attack?! Is some monster pulling me down?!

There was nothing there...

Oh.

The leather pouch had changed again—now the crystal was gray. It was glowing just as strong as ever, but...had it suddenly, without warning, gotten heavier?

“Ah...” There was something inside. Not the sword—I’d left that near the mountain of monster corpses. It didn’t feel familiar.

“So, what is it?”

Trembling, I turned the whole thing upside down.

Two items fell out—one bounced and rolled a little, the other fell flat with a crinkle. I picked them up.

I’d seen that packaging before. Seeing something so normal...it made me feel horribly homesick.

“This can’t be real. There’s no way...”

In my hands were a 500 ml plastic bottle of cola and a bag of beef jerky.

At first, I didn’t wonder why. I didn’t have time for thought.

“W-water...”

Water... Water, water water water water, water water water water.

I held the bottle with both hands. There was condensation on the surface.

Cold to the touch. Not a hallucination. This is real.

I twisted the cap.

“—?!”

I couldn't even summon the strength.

Are my stat modifiers not working? Or do they not apply to little stuff like gripping a bottle? Do stat modifiers just stop working when you're weak?

“Aaaah!” I twisted like my life depended on it—which it did, really.

Pshh...

The sweet smell of cola flooded my senses as I jerked the bottle toward my lips. I started gulping it down. I knew you weren't supposed to drink too fast when you were dehydrated, but I couldn't fight my instincts—couldn't hold back.

I only stopped when I started choking and coughing.

“It's so good...”

I realized I was crying. It was the most delicious cola I'd ever tasted in my life.

The thick, sweet taste penetrated me to my very core as it flowed in a refreshing river down into my stomach. My throat twitched with every bubble of the carbonated liquid. Every cell in my body was overjoyed to have sugar again. I let the feeling wash over me.

I looked back at the bottle—there was about a third left. I closed the cap and turned to my next prey.

I've never been so happy to see convenience store beef jerky.

Drinking the cola had somehow made me hungrier. I tore through the package and started tearing at the meat with my teeth.

Who cares about manners? Just me and the monsters down here anyway.

Chewing the hard, stringy meat felt amazing. The strongest taste was salt, but there was also a sweet, almost fragrant flavor underneath it.

I unscrewed the cap of the cola.

“J-just a little more...!”

I took a swig of the drink while the jerky was still in my mouth. The salty jerky mixed with the sweetness of the cola rolling over my

tongue, forming a perfect union. I'd never thought to put these two things together before, but...it was amazing.

It's so good. Have they always been this good...? Oh man...cola and beef jerky...

I wiped my mouth on my sleeve.

Three pieces of jerky left... Do I save them?

I started reaching for the packet again, but somehow...I resisted.

I have to save it. Continuing on with no food would be too risky.

"All right, then..."

Good...holding back is good. There's a little cola left, too. Good job, rational brain.

I picked up the jerky and idly looked at the packaging. There was a sticker on the side that read, "For Big Appetites! Ultra Pack!"

Dear whoever decided to make this a jumbo pack...I am eternally grateful.

I took a deep breath.

I was really, really into eating for a minute there—I must've looked crazy. Though I guess nobody could expect manners in a situation like that.

It might've been the sugar, but my brain seemed to be working a little better and I felt the strength returning to my limbs. I couldn't be sure, but I thought my stat modifiers' effects might've gotten weaker when I was hungry and exhausted.

As if waking from a stupor, I flinched and looked around.

This is bad. I was so caught up with the food that I forgot to watch out for monsters. I'm lucky that one didn't kill me while I was eating.

I moved to a more defensible spot against one of the walls and sank down into a sitting position. I put the plastic bottle under my arm and inspected the leather pouch again. It was empty. I ran my thumb across the crystal.

"It's grey now, huh..."

Starts out lime green. Put in enough mana, and it turns purple. Once the cola and jerky come out, it turns grey.

I had to assume that the sudden appearance of my cola and jerky had something to do with the crystal changing color.

So...pour enough mana into the pouch and something comes out. But where did it come from? Was it from somewhere in the real world?

Okay, there could be a million explanations and I don't know enough about magic to figure it out. Let's shelve that one for now. Put mana in, take food out...got it.

"Will it turn green again?"

It might only work once.

The pouch's glow had faded while I was eating. I started pouring mana into it and it started glowing again...but the crystal's color was unchanged.

Still grey. Does it reset after a while? And what if...

"Next time, it might not be food and water. It might be something else."

I needed to test all these theories somehow.

The leather pouch that the Goddess had given me out of "compassion," the E-Class hero's item she'd mocked as useless...it had saved my life. It was ironic.

"She called it compassion, but apparently the pouch was mine from the beginning of this whole summoning thing. So she really just returned what she stole from me..."

I stood back up and packed the leftover jerky and cola in my pouch.

"Okay, ready to go." I scratched my head. "I've started talking to myself a lot, huh...?"

I guess it makes sense, though. Walking around in silence through these caves would've driven me insane.

It's okay to talk to myself, right? Uh...I guess there's nobody here to judge me, so I can't see the harm.

All right. Food and water are handled for now, time to start heading up.

I walked back the way I'd come—through the place I'd started out, past the monster corpses, to the upper area, and into the desert.

"..."

Unexplored territory.

“I haven’t been leaving any markers so I can’t be totally sure, but...I don’t think I’ve been this way before...”

I walked cautiously over the fine sand. Two, maybe three hours passed before I found myself standing before a huge, twisting, rounded opening.

“Let’s do this.”

I took a step forward.

AWOOOOOOOH...

Was that the wind?

At least that meant there was air down there, though that didn’t necessarily mean it was connected to the surface. I hadn’t seen any monsters in the area yet, and I couldn’t sense any nearby.

Do none of the minotaurs or bird-heads live here?

I touched the black surface of one of the rocks. It was smooth as glass.

The terrain here was bumpy, dotted with puddle-like indentations and blanketed in white powder. The black stone jutted out of the sand like small, snow-topped mountains in a sea of white.

I kept walking, and eventually came out into a large cavern.

“Wow...”

There was a swampy patch of water nearby, and I went over to investigate. Unfortunately, the water was dark green...and were those bubbles? There was an intense smell hanging over it, too. It really didn’t look like something I’d want to drink.

Shame—I could’ve filled the plastic bottle if this stuff was drinkable.

“Hm?”

There was a skull floating on the surface. It looked human—somebody must’ve fallen in and drowned.

That’s proof of one thing, at least. Somebody else escaped those minotaurs and bird-headed monsters and made it up here. Another discarded hero, struggling to get away.

I searched for a way forward and found a smooth slope leading upwards.

Looks like a spiral staircase that’s given up, or pancake batter spread

too thin. It's a really gentle slope, I'm trying to say.

"I guess I should use it..."

I began to ascend.

This is totally a dungeon—why'd the Goddess call this place a ruin?

As soon as I started my ascent, white shapes caught my attention.

"This is—"

A small depression in the rock up ahead came into view...and it was filled with bones—countless bones.

Not just human bones, either...bones of the minotaurs and bird-heads, too.

I swallowed.

There's something even nastier lurking here, no doubt about it.

"What's that...?"

I could hear something, a cry from the darkness...

The massive crash of rock being cracked open.

"Wh-what was that?!"

I raised my arm to protect my face. The shrapnel shot past me, just barely missing me to careen wildly across the sand.

When the dust settled, I saw it.

"That thing's...huge."

A massive cavern had opened up in the rock face to my left, and through it...

Footsteps. A massive, orange-glowing form moving in the darkness.

"That's..."

It was a dragon.

Its massive, lizard-like head had empty eye sockets, and dark purple rotting meat hung from its exposed ribcage. It stretched its giant, ragged wings and writhing, sinewy tail. Its arms ended in razor-sharp claws.

It opened its mouth and let out a guttural roar.

Is it a skeleton, or some kind of ghoul, or...

A zombie dragon.

The roar almost knocked me off my feet. It reeked. Something oozed from between its teeth, splashed on the ground and fizzed.

More acid, huh?

“Guaaaaaaarrrr!”

A thin, worm-like tongue shot out of the zombie dragon’s mouth, clearly gunning right for me. For a moment, I was frozen.

“So this is your home, huh?”

That pile of bones in the hollow must be the people who came before me—the zombie dragon’s garbage heap.

I could feel how badly it wanted to kill me. I raised my hand.

I’m grateful. Really, I am. Thanks for making it easy on me. This way, I don’t have to feel bad about annihilating you. Thank you for stepping into the arena—now it’s down to survival of the fittest.

The zombie dragon raised its claws.

It probably thinks I’m frozen in fear, so it’s coming to turn me into mincemeat.

Everything about the monster before me was horrifying, but staring it down, I was overwhelmed with another emotion—joy.

This thing is just more experience points.

“Paralyze.”

With a creak of bone, the monster’s claws froze in mid-air.

“Poison.”

“Almost done, huh?”

The yellow gauge for the Paralyze effect duration was almost at zero.

“Sleep.”

A blue gauge appeared above the zombie dragon. After a few seconds, the yellow gauge disappeared.

With paralysis no longer holding it still, it crashed to the ground in a heap of bones, legs bent at awkward angles—like someone had suddenly turned on the gravity and squashed it flat.

It’s hard to tell with the hollow eye sockets, but...

“It’s sleeping...I think.”

I sat down cross-legged in front of the dragon's head. Its white bones were turning a familiar shade of purple. Even undead enemies weren't immune to my skills.

"Zzz... Zzz..."

Is it...snoring?

It stank of acid and rotting flesh...and there was some green stuff growing on it that looked like moss.

The dragon showed no signs of waking.

All I can do now is wait. I need to stay here and stay alert, though—gotta make sure I'm ready with paralysis before sleep wears off.

Might as well check my stats.

"Status open."

With one eye on the gauge, I opened my stat screen.

Too-ka Mimori

Level 501

HP: +1503 MP: +12403/16533

Attack: +1503 Defense: +1503 Vitality: +1503

Speed: +1503 Intelligence: +1503

Title: E-Class Hero

"Level 501. I'm starting to look pretty intimidating..."

Though other than my high MP, I still don't even know if these stats are any good. Not to beat a dead horse, but Oyamada's vitality at level 1 was +500, right? There's no way to know if everybody's stat modifiers work by multiplication like mine, but if they do, Oyamada would only need to be level 4 to have more health than I do.

"It wouldn't surprise me if you improve even slower than a completely average human."

That's what that foul Goddess told me...so my level could shoot up hundreds, and I might only reach the stats of an average soldier?

"So..."

I just can't put too much importance on any of these stats other than MP. What I really need to do is work on my reflexes so I can react fast enough to surprise attacks and stuff like that. The numbers don't mean anything, but fighting through these ruins should give me lots of practice.

"And how's my MP...?"

I used some on the pouch and some on this dragon, but there's still plenty left. No need to worry about running out soon.

Paralyze: Level 2 / Mana cost: 10MP / Multiple target skill

Sleep: Level 2 / Mana cost: 10MP / Multiple target skill

Poison: Level 2 / Mana cost: 10MP / Multiple target skill

So all my skills had been upgraded to work on more than one creature when I leveled up. I could see all the mana costs as well.

I rubbed my chin.

They've improved, but the mana cost hasn't changed. Given how long these effects last, and their 100% hit rate...

"These skills are incredible..."

I'm supposed to be an E-Class hero—lowest rank there is.

"Are they really low-level skills?"

I remembered Kirihara asking the Goddess about this.

"Why's S-Class the highest?"

"The 'S' stands for 'Special', of course."

She said she used the alphabet system so it'd be easy for us to understand our classes...

"Do they all stand for English words?" Nobody who actually saw my fights would call my skills weak.

"What if—"

A theory formed in my mind—not one I could test in any way, just a shot in the dark.

What if the "E" in E-Class stands for something, too? What if it's not the lowest rank, it's entirely outside the ranking system. Not like the others. Outcast. What if the "E" in E-Class stands for...

Exceptional.

“Maybe E-Class heroes aren’t ranked the same as the others—they’re *exceptions*.”

My stats are so much lower than the A-Class heroes that my “exceptional” status couldn’t apply to them...unless the others gain their stats at a slower pace than I do, I guess. Either way, Oyamada’s vitality at level 1 was still higher than mine at level 100, which makes me seriously weak in comparison. All I can say for sure is that my unique skills are something special. Maybe it’s like...all my points got put into them, leaving nothing for my normal stats?

“Not like I can check down here, anyway.”

I have weapons to fight with—that’s all I need to know.

I sat silently waiting for the zombie dragon to die.

If it dies and I’m really far away, do I still get the EXP? I want to test that, but...I need the EXP from this thing right now. It’s the first time I’ve seen one, too—this isn’t the time to test out new theories.

A long time passed.

“Ggur...”

Level up!

Level 501 → Level 549

The zombie dragon finally died.

It must’ve had a lot of HP—that took a while. Poison is my lifeline, but it’s always going to take a long time to work.

“...”

But now, a new problem presented itself. I’d defeated monsters, hunger, and thirst, but there was one more pressing issue to deal with.

My eyelids grew heavy.

“Sleep.”

I was summoned to this world, transported to these ruins...my heart had been pounding for what felt like days. I’d run sprints, almost died, climbed up and down stairs. And now that I was out of immediate

danger and had gotten to eat something, it was all catching up to me. My nerves were unwinding a little, letting me relax. My brain screamed out for relief, and my fatigued body clamored for me to rest.

Doesn't matter how high my stats are—I still need sleep. And if my stat modifiers stop working when I'm sleep-deprived, that's even worse.

What do I do?

If there was someone else here with me, we could take turns keeping watch. These are ruins, right? So, where are the ruined buildings? The rooms?

I let my eyes follow the spiral slope that stretched high into the ceiling.

I've got to go up there, I'm sure of it. Can I even make it when I'm this exhausted? I might collapse halfway up. And I beat this one dragon-thing, but what if there are more further up? Should I try to get some rest down here—is there even a decent place to sleep in this huge cave?

I decided to check the perimeter of the cave I was in. The opening the zombie dragon had made in the rock led to a tunnel, which narrowed toward the end into the dragon's inner sanctum. The whole chamber was full of dark green liquid, like a city sewer system.

It looked like acid. I picked up a stone and threw it in—it hissed as it dissolved. It seemed a little weaker than the stuff that oozed out of the monsters' bodies, but still dangerous, and the smell was so intense I could hardly stand being near it. I couldn't sleep there.

What now? I don't want to sleep in the open...

I looked over at the defeated zombie dragon. Its bones were in a heap, jutting out every which way—my sleep spell made it collapse in on itself.

I had an idea.

“Uh...I don't know if it's a good one, though.”

I walked over to the dragon and lay my hand on its broken skeleton. Then I drew back and punched it hard—it was like a rock.

“Should be solid enough...”

I began to climb the fallen skeleton.

“Maybe...here?”

Two thick bones had crashed down on top of each other, leaving a small gap.

I peered into the tight hollow beyond.

“Can I...really fit in there?”

I squeezed myself between the two bones.

“Uhn...okay...”

I popped through the opening, then held up the leather pouch to look around. The little chamber was too small to stand up straight in—I had to stoop—and there was just enough space for one person to lie down. It was good enough.

“It reeks pretty bad in here, but at least I’ll be safe enough to sleep for a while.” There wasn’t anything I could do about the smell, and at least it didn’t burn my nose like the acid smell in that tunnel. I shimmied back outside. The dragon’s giant bones were strewn around the area, and some had shattered when they fell. I picked up a thin fragment and broke it in half with one firm stamp.

Okay, this piece is soft enough to snap, and it makes a good, loud sound, too.

“Here, here...and here...”

I laid out pieces of bone all around the hollow where I was planning to sleep. If a monster tried to get near me, it should step on a bone shard and make noise. It was a simple alarm system, but having it there made me feel a lot calmer. I squeezed back into the hollow.

I sat in the dark, propped up against a wall of bone. It would be too dangerous to lie down—I wanted to be ready to move at a moment’s notice. I let my eyes close, and almost immediately drifted off.

Crack!

I woke with a start and slowly opened my eyes.

“They’re here.”

How long was I asleep? My head feels...good. I can do this. I read on the internet once that as long as you sleep deeply enough, a short rest is enough...I feel kind of heavy and sluggish, but not much more than I usually do when I just woke up.

Okay, let’s see what kind of monster it is this time.

Crack—

Huh?

A chorus of cracking sounds followed.

Sounds like more than one...I guess these ones travel in packs.

I shifted so I could peek out at them from my hiding place. I couldn't make out their shapes, but I could feel the clear presence of multiple monsters outside. They looked like they were searching for something...me, probably.

I wonder if they caught my scent. Maybe this rotting dragon is masking the smell? Still...they seem organized, way different from the monsters I've dealt with so far. The minotaurs and bird-heads acted like animals, but these ones are acting intelligent.

With a cacophony of cracking sounds, they stamped down hard on my alarm bones and let out a series of strange noises.

"Geeeee? Geh-geh-geh-geee!"

"Where is it?!" they seemed to be saying over and over.

"There's no way I'll be able to slip away unnoticed. But hey..."

I squeezed myself out into the open.

"Running away was never the plan."

I can't turtle in my hiding place, my line of sight wouldn't be good enough to hit all these guys. I have the higher ground up here, and cover from keeping my back to the wall.

I finally got a good look at the approaching creatures. They were humanoid lizard monsters—pretty much like lizardman monsters from games or movies, with a few horrifying additions. They each had writhing bunches of black tentacles sprouting from their shoulders, and their hands flopped in the wind like wet handkerchiefs.

The wriggling tentacles dripped onto the rock below, hissing with each drip.

Acid. Of course. Might as well give up on eating any of these things...

The lizardmen had jet-black eyes with clouded gold pupils, just like the others. And on their foreheads, each one had...a second mouth? It seemed bizarre. The creatures had massive, overdeveloped legs compared to their thinner arms, and they were enormous—bigger than

the minotaurs, even. I counted twenty of them.

“Geee-ehh?”

The first lizardman to notice me let out a guttural cry.

“Geeaah!”

The monsters turned their murderous eyes on me all at once.

They want to kill me, but...there's something else.

“Gyo, gyo, gyo!”

“Huh?”

One of the monsters near the back came forward, holding a long stick with something hanging off it...it was a skeleton, most likely human, wearing a long dress. It looked like they'd dressed it up in those clothes.

“Wahh, wahh, waahh~! ♪”

The lizardman waved his stick and jiggled the skeleton back and forth, and the one next to him wailed and narrowed its eyes, pretending to cry and looking at the ceiling.

“N-Ngooooo... Gnaaaahh!”

Its voice changed. Was it imitating a scream?

“Oh, I get it now.”

The skeleton in the dress—they were acting out the last moments of her life. Next, another lizardman brought forward a blackened, charred skeleton in masculine clothes.

I can already guess what happened to that one.

One of the lizardmen rolled over onto its back and started flailing its limbs wildly to the cheers of the others.

“Gye-gye-gyeeaaaahh?!”

“Geh geh geh geh!”

They were mocking the way these heroes died. I could imagine the man twisting in pain as he burned to death. These creatures had watched. They'd enjoyed it.

Next, a tall one stepped forward and laid a human skull at its feet.

The lizardman looked at me with narrowed eyes and sharp fangs as the sole of its foot came down hard and crushed the skull to powder.

“Fear me,” it seemed to threaten. “This is how we kill. We crush. We annihilate.”

Their message came through loud and clear. They weren't bothering to attack...because I wasn't a threat to them. No matter how much I leveled up, nothing except my MP really improved—and it seemed like they could tell, through smell or some other sense, that I was at the bottom of the barrel. So why bother killing me quickly? They were certain they could kill me whenever they felt like it, so why not have some fun first? They probably don't think somebody like me could've killed this zombie dragon—they think I came across the corpse randomly and I'm just cowering inside it.

They had the same violent instincts as every other monster I'd come across, but there was something else.

Cruelty.

“...”

My mind went back to just before I was sent to the ruins—the faces of Kiriara, Oyamada, Yasu, the Goddess, all of class 2-C, throwing stones at the weakling, mocking and abusing me, looking down their noses and laughing, telling me to die. I stretched out my arm toward the lizardmen, and they looked overjoyed, jeering at me in delight. They must've thought I was raising my arms in surrender.

“Thank you.”

“Gyo?”

I glared coldly down at the lizardmen.

“For being trash. I don't have to feel bad about killing you.”

Suddenly, the eyes of the first lizardman began to glow, and a strange, high-pitched noise echoed through the cavern. The creature's eyes and the mouth on its forehead began to glow red.

“Paralyze.”

“Ge-geh?”

The lizardman's head exploded. It had been preparing an attack, but the energy from its forehead had nowhere to go.

Was it pissed that I wasn't scared of it? Or maybe it just wanted to kill me and thought lasers would be a good way. Doesn't matter now.

I looked down at the headless lizardman.

“Trying to shoot me was a bad idea.”

I realized something else, too. It might’ve been all the practice I’d had being attacked by monsters, but my reflexes had gotten incredibly fast. I walked with death, but my instincts were keeping up.

I was surprised at how sensitive I’d become to my enemies’ movements. I reacted so quickly it was like I was seeing the future.

A preemptive strike, you could call it.

Walking through the ruins of death had honed my senses—this wasn’t some speed stat modifier, it was what *real* experience had turned me into.

Who cares about numbers on a screen? These reflexes are my real stats.

As long as I learned to read my opponents, honed my reflexes, and always pulled off the first attack, I’d be unstoppable. These ruins were the perfect place to train—I didn’t have a second to relax here.

The pack of misshapen lizardmen fanned out. They looked worried and paused to consider their next actions, maybe wondering if their dead companion had misfired.

The ones in front couldn’t see what was happening in back—they stood facing me, frozen in place.

That’s right. You can’t move.

Their faces had lost all of that confidence, replaced with confusion as they struggled against an inconceivable threat.

“So, I can hit multiple targets at once, you know,” I said casually. The lizardmen stared back at me, their eyes filled with dread.

“Geh...Gehh...”

“I love the expressions on your faces.”

“Hm?”

Something’s coming. Rumbling of feet on stone.

A stampede.

A horde of lizards on all fours burst into the cavern with the sound of a raging torrent. They had string collars around their necks.

They were probably drawn here by that explosion. Are they pet mounts for the lizardmen?

There were at least twenty of them.

Golden eyes, black skin crisscrossed with orange lines, and acid spitting from horn-like antennae...and murder in their eyes, focused only on me.

“Igyeeeee!”

With unearthly screams, they charged at me. They knocked the paralyzed lizardmen aside in their frenzy to reach me—I guess they weren’t the lizardmen’s pets after all.

Behind the lizards, another explosion shook the cavern, creating a new tunnel in a shower of rocks and dust.

With a shriek, two zombie dragons emerged and charged straight at me.

“Jeez...”

Why are these monsters like this?

“Are the people who come here just prey to you? Toys you kill for your amusement?”

You’ve killed so many of us...

Tortured us...

You thought you were the strongest things down here. You never imagined a human could defeat you.

“I guess the low stat modifiers aren’t all bad, though.”

They make my enemies underestimate me.

I looked down at the frozen lizardmen who’d laughed at me, so sure I was easy prey. They lowered their guards the moment they saw me, and now they were nothing more than EXP waiting for me to take it.

“You did your best, shitty monsters.”

I held up both hands.

“Paralyze.”

A wild smirk spread across my face.

“Poison.”

I’ll gladly kill every last one of you.

Kashima Kobato

D-CLASS HERO Kashima Kobato walked down the extravagantly decorated hallway. It looked like a castle straight out of the fantasy movies she loved so much—like the European middle ages with a magical twist.

She was having trouble even expressing how she felt. She was in the kind of place she'd always dreamed of seeing in real life. In different circumstances, she'd probably feel excited and happy to be there.

Kobato lifted her eyes from the carpet and stared at the head of the girl in front of her. The Goddess led them through the halls like they were still on a class trip.

She'd told them that there was something they had to take care of before they all received their unique items.

Kobato closed her eyes, clasping her hands together as if in prayer.

I'm scared...

Watching that three-eyed wolf be turned to ash was utterly terrifying.

After her measurement, she'd hidden with the other cowering, despairing students at the edges of the room. And Kobato understood very well what had happened inside that magic circle. Her classmates shouting insults and laughing...and she'd learned that the Goddess might be the one to fear most.

"Screw you, foul Goddess."

Mimori-kun...

She couldn't hold back her tears.

I'm sorry... I'm so sorry... I couldn't do anything...

On her way home from school one day, Kobato found a cat lying

near the school gates. It was weak and injured, but everyone ignored it—the only exception was two boys who laughed and took pictures of it with their smartphones.

“Dude! If this gets enough likes on Inste, let’s rescue the cat! That’s a super inspirational story—it’ll totally go viral! We could even get on the news!”

The boys left and never came back, and Kobato was left alone with her thoughts.

What should I do...?

She took out her smartphone and searched for “cat” and “injured” with shaky hands. She was always like this, terrified of acting on her own, waiting for someone else to make decisions for her.

“N-no!” She landed on a page filled with pictures of dead cats. Her hands froze. She closed her eyes tight.

I can’t do it... I don’t want to see this...

“Kashima?”

A boy...?

“Oh... Mimori-kun...”

When she opened her eyes, her classmate Mimori Touka was standing next to her. They’d never spoken before. He didn’t stand out much—maybe that’s why Kobato felt a kind of kinship with him. He wasn’t scary like the boys in Kirihara Takuto’s group.

“That cat...is it okay?”

“Well...” Kobato explained what she’d seen.

“Gotcha,” Mimori said simply.

“Huh?”

“Let’s take it to the vet. There’s one not far from here.”

“Um...”

A vet. Of course. Why didn’t I think of that...?

“Are you hurt, little buddy?” Touka gently lifted the cat into his arms. “Stay still for me, okay?”

I’ve never seen Mimori-kun with an expression like that...

The vet told them that the cat had an injured paw and was

malnourished—which explained why it'd been lying still like that. It would get better with the right treatment. Kobato breathed a sigh of relief as they walked together out of the waiting room.

“Mimori-kun... Th-thank you.”

“No worries. I like cats.”

“A-about the money...” Kobato started opening her purse—Touka had paid before she even realized it.

He shot her a wry smile.

“Nah, it's fine. I'm the one who suggested the vet, after all.”

“B-but...”

“Really, it's fine. I never spend much, anyway. Might as well use my money for this.”

As always, Kobato couldn't find the right words to object, so she let her purse drop and accepted with a silent nod. She was always like that—going along with anything, avoiding conflict or kicking it down the road.

I should make conversation... What can we talk about...?

She forced an awkward smile—she was good at smiling her way out of situations.

“So...do you like animals, Mimori-kun?” she asked.

“Yeah, I do,” Mimori replied, staring off into the middle distance. “More than people, at least.”

“Huh...?”

Mimori-kun?

Touka seemed to notice that he'd upset her, though the troubled look didn't leave his eyes.

“Oh...not like that! I just mean that when you're with an animal, you don't have to worry what they think of you, right? I really like my foster parents now, so—”

It seemed like an odd reply to Kobato, like he was desperately trying to cover up his real feelings. She'd read about stuff like this, though—teenage boys trying to seem cool and different by claiming they hate the world. She read about a lot of different stuff online—no matter how bad you are at talking to people, you can find out pretty

much anything by throwing questions into a search bar all day.

Touka didn't seem like the kind of guy who'd play that game, though. That stuff he'd said seemed more like he'd let his real feelings slip by accident.

"Um...so, anyway...you're a really kind person, Kashima."

"Huh...? I...I don't think I am. You're much more... Uh, s-see you tomorrow at school..."

"Sure. See you around, Kashima."

That was the last time she'd talked to Mimori Touka. She never worked up the courage to try again. For the introverted Kashima Kobato, going up to a guy at school and just talking to him was too much. Touka had come over and tried to start a conversation one time, but she ignored him—she wasn't brave enough to respond. Ever since then, she felt a little guilty whenever she saw him at school. The cat they'd found together was now a member of the Kashima household.

How could they...he's one of our classmates.

Kobato found class 2-C terrifying. When Oyamada kicked Yasu's seat on the bus, Kobato was shaken, too. She couldn't even look Oyamada Shougo in the eyes—he might give her a heart attack.

I'm a coward. That three-eyed wolf...do heroes have to fight things like that? I can't do it, I know I can't. The Goddess scares me, too. I can't describe it properly, I just have a bad feeling about her. Sogou Ayaka was amazing, going up against her like that. Her and the Takao sisters...they're in a different dimension from me. Kirihara Takuto, Oyamada Shougo, Yasu Tomohiro, all of them. I'll never be like them.

Everybody here is better than me.

She looked back down at her feet.

I'm a D-Class hero and a coward... maybe they're going to dispose of me next.

"Kobato~? Why're you staring into space? Still worried?"

She raised her head.

“Oh... Ikusaba-san.” Her classmate, Ikusaba Asagi, had turned to smile back at her.

“Asagi,” she shot back.

“Um?”

“I’m always telling you—I hate when people call me by my last name, ’kay? If you’re doing it on purpose, me and most of the other girls in 2-C can always start excluding you, got it?”

“Oh... S-sorry,” stammered Kobato.

She’s a B-Class, I think...

After Oyamada Shougo was ranked A-Class and Asagi got B-Class, everybody pretty much fell in behind the two of them. Top of the hierarchy was Kirihara Takuto’s group, of course, but Asagi had serious influence among the girls in class. Nobody wanted her to turn against them—all the girls were wary of her power. She accepted some girls into her circle, and others hung around the outskirts trying to flatter her and win her favor. Others maintained a harmless neutrality.

Nobody spoke back to her.

Kobato chose to be neutral—a background character, you could say. In her free time at school, she read light novels on her phone in a corner of the classroom.

“I’ve got a question for you, Pidgey,” Asagi said. She always used that nickname for Kobato because of the kanji for pigeon in her name.

“S-sure... What is it?”

Asagi moved closer and snaked a hand around Kobato’s waist in a gesture that felt more threatening than friendly.

“Look at the class...it’s gonna fall apart any time now.”

What?

“Fall apart...?”

“Oh yeah! 2-C’s gonna split, there’s no doubt.”

“I-it is?”

Asagi looked to the front of the class, where Kirihara Takuto’s group followed close behind the Goddess. Yasu Tomohiro walked just behind them.

The hierarchy was assembling itself neatly in real time, the

powerful at the front of the line, the weaker at the back, though Sogou Ayaka and the Takao sisters were all conspicuously absent. But Asagi had deliberately come all the way to the back of the line to talk to the weaker students.

“See how all the strong ones are gathered up front? Pain in the ass, most of them. But sooner or later we’re gonna form real groups with real consequences, Pidghey.”

Asagi grinned unconvincingly—her eyes were fixed on Kobato.

“When that time comes...you’re with us, right? On our side.”

“Wh-what...?”

“War’s a numbers game, Kobato-chan~! Heh, but I guess a bird-brain like you wouldn’t get that! Lucky for you, nobody cares what’s in your head when you’ve got breasts like these, right, Pidghey?”

“S-stop...!”

Asagi reached out and started touching them. Kobato flinched away—she’d been uncomfortable with her breasts ever since they started getting bigger in middle school.

“Ah...”

Asagi drew her in even closer.

“Listen, I’m a B-Class hero inviting some D-Class loser along for the ride. A smart girl would jump at the chance, if you ask me. Or what, you think Kirihara’s gonna take you? No way! He doesn’t want some clumsy D-Class slowing him down.”

“I-I don’t want to pick sides...” Kobato protested.

Although...maybe if Sogou-san had a group...

Kobato couldn’t help but respect and admire Sogou Ayaka. She was rich, intelligent, beautiful, athletic, sophisticated, strong, kind, and...

“Ayaka’s totally gonna die.”

“Huh...?”

It was like Asagi had read her mind. Kobato’s heart raced.

“S-Sogou-san’s going to die? Wh-what do mean?”

“You still don’t get it? You saw that dummy go up against the Goddess, didn’t you? She won’t last a week! The rich girl is all bravery,

high ideals and recklessness... That princess doesn't even know the difference between being brave and being stupid. Get it, Kobato?"

Kobato cleared her throat.

I don't care what you say, Sogou-san's amazing...

She swallowed, and those words went down with her.

"You've gotta understand the position you're in, too, Kobato-chan! After we beat this Demon King or whatever and go back to the real world..." She tapped Kobato's shoulders to emphasize her point.

"Maybe we just won't, like, have a place for you anymore! Think about that, Pidgey~!"

"..."

"Answer me!"

Asagi gripped under Kobato's breasts and bounced them up and down twice.

"Kyaa!"

Kobato blushed bright red and quickly folded her arms over her chest. Asagi glanced knowingly at the boys around them.

"You're a D-Class hero, but you've got your own *assets* to use against the boys, huh? I know you'll step up and use them when we need you to. Let's do this, Pidgey-chan!"

Kobato looked down at her feet again.

I can't believe she'd be so cruel...

There was a sudden commotion at the front of the line.

"Honorable heroes, run for your lives!" One of the hooded figures dashed through the line of students, red-faced and panting.

"What is the meaning of this?" the Goddess demanded.

"My apologies, Goddess! While we were preparing the monsters, a foolish soldier let a proto-dragon loose in the castle!"

With a screech, a creature flew around the corner—it looked just like a small dragon.

A monster...! Kobato recoiled in fear.

"Goddess, this creature is too much for us to handle! P-please, have mercy—!" pleaded the hooded figure.

“Move.”

Kirihara Takuto stepped forward and raised his hand.

“Dragonic Buster!”

A gleaming gold light shot from Kirihara’s hand and turned the small dragon to ash.



Explosive aftershocks followed the blast for several seconds, then part of the ceiling collapsed.

“Hunh. I guess it gets faster and more powerful at level 2,” Kiri-hara said disinterestedly. The rest of the class stood frozen for a moment, then broke out into rapturous applause.

“Takuto!! Dude, that was so cool!”

“Of course it was cool! It’s Kiri-hara-kun!”

“They don’t call you an S-Class for nothing, huh?!”

“So awesome!”

“Kiri-hara-kun, you’re so cool!”

“I’m, like, totally falling in love...”

Kiri-hara cracked his neck to one side.

“It went down in one hit...? That monster was nothing. What’re you all getting so worked up for? All I did was use my skill thing—hm?”

Kiri-hara opened his stat screen.

“It says I leveled up. Level 10...?”

“Wh-what?!” The hooded figure’s mouth hung open as he looked to the Goddess in disbelief. “Goddess, this is...!”

“Yes, Kiri-hara-san truly has the makings of an incredible hero. I look forward to seeing him develop,” the Goddess said with surprise and admiration.

“So, I don’t really care, but I guess that’s good or something?” Kiri-hara asked vaguely.

“It’s *phenomenal*!” the hooded figure cried. “To think that you would grow so fast...! No hero has ever leveled into double digits in a single day before! I’ve heard that level 8 was the highest ever attained—and that was by...”

“The Hero of Darkness,” the Goddess interjected. “That is correct.” She glanced over at Yasu, who had turned up his nose, looking satisfied. Stats, she’d explained, could only be seen by the hero himself, the Goddess, and those she granted special permission.

The Goddess threw her hands wide in a sweeping gesture.

“These summoning results are truly marvellous! I believe that the

Demon King and his cohorts are the most formidable they've been in thousands of years, but they're in for the battle of their lives, I'm certain of it!"

The Goddess turned back.

"Let us proceed!"

"Where are you taking us, anyway?" Oyamada asked.

"Ah ha~! Well, based on your reaction to that dragon, I believe our first order of business is getting you used to killing things~!" She laughed cheerfully.

Get used to killing things...?

"For heroes raised in a peaceful environment, that can be quite the hurdle. For some it's difficult to bear—taking a living thing's life can be a bit of a shock! For some of you, this will be your first true obstacle," she said, smiling benevolently. "However, you must overcome it! Unless you would like to end up like our poor friend Mimori-san? As much as it would grieve me to send any of you away..."

Is she saying...anyone who fails will be disposed of? I can't do it...I'm too scared.

Kobato could already feel tears welling up.

What's going to happen to us...?

Mimori Touka

I SAT CROSS-LEGGED on a rock and gnawed a single piece of beef jerky for breakfast.

Sickly, sleeping lizardmen lay bubbling all around me. Behind them, the lizard mount corpses piled up, and to either side, the two zombie dragons lay in heaps, oozing and moaning.

Cries of suffering filled the air. And I was the one who had created all this suffering...who'd committed all these murders. All along, I'd had this inside me—the ability to kill. I narrowed my eyes at the groaning monsters and looked down at them all with contempt.

For a moment, as my eyes passed over the two rotting dragons, their faces looked familiar.

That day, as usual, they'd kicked me as I lay balled up on the floor. It was after dinner, I think. My mother tended to buy too much at the supermarket, which caused fights between my parents—but those leftovers were usually the only thing I had to eat.

“The kid's gotten tough! Ugh, it's no fun if you aren't crying!”

“Don't kill him, okay? People might make a fuss about it.”

“Shut up! If he dies, he dies! We'll say it was an accident—just play dumb until they give up! And hey, don't we get a bunch of money if the brat croaks?!”

“Darling, let me kick him, too! Take that! Does it hurt? Does it?! We go through hell every day at work, stress—every—single—day! And that makes us better than you, stupid kid! Take that! You got something to say, Too-ka?! Die! Die! Die!”

“I'm getting another drink. Do it! Just kill him! It'll be a relief to be rid of him!”

“Take *that*—huh? Ugh, neighbors are complaining about the noise again. Idiots!”

“Hey! I don't want them calling them child services again!”

“Y-yeah...okay, okay, we'll keep it down! Sorry! Our son's such a little troublemaker, I know~!”

Someday, I will murder you.

If I don't, you're going to kill me.

I need more power. If I had the power to destroy everything...

Kill them.

Something inside me is calling out for revenge.

I'm going to kill them.

I'm going to freakin' kill them.

Was that when I learned how to kill?

"I guess that's one thing to be grateful to them for. If I ever make it back home, maybe I'll look them up and give them a proper thank you."

I grimaced. My foster parents had shown me nothing but warmth and kindness. They taught me how to live by their example. If I was going to thank anybody, it'd be them.

"Kindness, huh?" I looked down at the monsters. The first to die were the lizard mounts. I watched each one breathe its last.

Level up!

There was nothing exciting or satisfying about it. This was hell—a hell that I'd created. I'd done something terrible. This was the absolute opposite of kindness.

Tears welled up inside me.

"What am I doing...?"

The hideous reality of what I was doing hit me all at once, and...

"There's nothing."

I felt...empty. Emotionless. Tears rolled down my cheeks, and I just stood there, totally numb.

Why am I crying?

Did somebody poison me?

Has my conscience been put to sleep?

Is my good judgement paralyzed?

I couldn't think. That scared me more than anything. I wiped my face on my sleeve.

My breathing grew shallow and the tears dried up.

"I don't have a choice."

I'm fighting for my survival down here.

I have to accept it...accept who I've had to become.

The new me—Too-ka Mimori.

You try to kill me, I try to kill you.

It's simple. I already have this murderous side of me, deep inside. It's only a matter of letting it run loose.

I'll annihilate everything in my path.

I looked inside myself, and stared deep into the darkness I saw there.

"Hey."

I'm not afraid of you anymore.

The darkness I used to fear was now my best friend.

With a chorus of cries, the lizardmen died. A little while later, the zombie dragons followed. It was a brutal, disgusting thing to witness. As I prepared to move on to the next area, I remembered.

Level up!

My lips creased into a smile.

Level up!

Level 549 → Level 665

I was pretty sure the lizardmen had come out of the acid swamp

I'd found earlier—their clothes were soaked in familiar liquid. I knew there was no way I could swim through that stuff, so I wouldn't be able to pay them a visit.

The hole that the two zombie dragons had blasted just led to more swamp. I threw the bones that the lizardmen had been playing with into the hole with all the others. The ground was too hard to give them a proper burial, so that was the best I could manage. I weighed down the acid-burned clothes with rocks and sank them into the swamp.

If I leave them, the monsters will just keep playing with them.

Finished with my cleanup, I resumed my mindless trudge up the spiral slope. My legs ached with fatigue, but my stat modifiers seemed to be doing their work—I could tell I was stronger and healthier than I'd ever been in my old world.

I climbed until the slope finally leveled out. At the top, a pair of double-faced leopard people stood guard—they reminded me of the Caper Tigers from Dragon Quest, but over two meters tall, with the same black skin, orange veins, and dripping acid as the other monsters I'd faced.

Weird, mishapen faces too. Not like any leopard I've seen before...

The leopardmen seemed unsurprised to see me—did they hear me coming? As usual, they clearly wanted to kill me. I raised my arm, and the leopardmen narrowed their eyes in what looked like contempt.

The one on the right stamped down hard against the rock. Before it could do anything else, I acted.

That's what these ruins had given me—reflexes.

“Paralyze.”

It froze in place. The other looked confused—like it hadn't yet figured out what I'd done. Then its face contorted in disbelief as it tried to move and couldn't.

“Poison.”

At the same time, they bubbled up purple, and their expressions looked sick. I wondered again whether I would still get experience points if they died while I was far away, but again, this was my first time dealing with these particular monsters and I didn't want to miss out if they gave a ton of EXP.

Eventually the leopardmen died, almost in unison.

Level up!

Level 665 → Level 692

Okay, their EXP isn't bad, but it's not amazing either.

I walked past the two dead monsters up into the next area—which was, surprise, yet another cave.

More of them.

There were six more leopardmen sitting in a circle. They all turned to look at me, confusion written all over their faces. But a moment later those expressions turned to murderous joy—a new toy for them to play with had fallen right into their laps.

One of them took something out from under its arm—a rope with a human skull tied at either end, like a grisly pair of nunchucks. It started swinging them around.

“Guaaah, Guaaah Ga-gaah! ♪”

One of them sang a taunting little song and pointed at the nunchucks. Its expression was cruel, and I immediately knew what it was trying to say.

“Look! This is one of your friends, isn't it? You scared, human?”

I raised my arm.

“Paralyze.”

“Guh?!”

“Poison.”

Six leopardman corpses lay motionless on the ground before me.

I'd finally had the chance to test whether I still got experience if I didn't stay in the area. After poisoning them, I walked back to the original two and waited—at least 500 meters away.

I didn't level up. So that answered that—you don't get EXP if you're too far away when they die.

Two leopardmen took me from level 665 to level 692, so if I killed six

of them...ugh, I wish I'd gotten even one level.

It was a shame to waste the EXP, but I was happy to test my theory.

I picked up the skull nunchucks from where the leopardman had dropped them, took the bones off the rope, and walked slowly back the way I'd come until I reached the zombie dragon's lair.

I placed the two skulls alongside the other bones and clasped my hands together in prayer. I wasn't creeped out by the skulls any more—instead, I felt a sense of kinship with them. They were discarded heroes, just like me. They did well to make it this far.

“...”

I kept walking. I traced a bumpy, winding path through the bare rock of the caves. The scenery never changed, but the path was definitely sloping upwards. I had to be getting closer to the surface, I reminded myself, pushing down any feelings of futility.

“Hm?”

My leather pouch's light went out.

Last time, I poured in as much mana as I could...but I guess even that's run out.

“Huh? The crystal... Its color changed back?”

The crystal wasn't grey anymore—it was back to its original lime green. My heart started to race—I was down to my last piece of jerky, and there was maybe one mouthful of cola left in the bottle. I started pouring mana into the pouch, praying that it would work again.

The purple gauge on the crystal began to fill.

Does it give food and water every time...? I don't need nails or something right now, got it? C'mon, please...

I reached in and pulled out a boiled egg rice ball and a 500 ml bottle of green tea.

“All right!”

Food and water.

I wanted to scream. I couldn't be positive yet, but it seemed like it provided food and water every time.

Even better...

“It has a cooldown. It works more than once.”

I’d seen boiled egg rice balls in convenience stores, but never eaten one before. I tore through the packaging.

It’s so good... Is that soy sauce?

The gooey yellow center stuck to my tongue. The salt of the soy sauce mixed with the creamy mayonnaise in a heavenly combination, and the seaweed just brought out those flavors more.

I can’t remember the last time I ate rice.

The rice was colored soft brown like it had been cooked in stock, and the strong seasoning attacked my tongue with waves of ecstasy. The taste overwhelmed my senses as I finished the rice ball in a few bites. I opened the green tea and took a swig, washing away the soy sauce taste—this was a different flavor combination from the jerky and cola, but just as satisfying in its own way. I chugged half the bottle, then capped the rest to save.

“Ahhh...” Eating was incredible.

I shoved the bottle and the wrapper from my rice ball back into my pouch—the leather bag was bigger than it looked, and there was still plenty of space inside.

Is that because it’s magic? The leather’s tough, too.

My hunger and thirst satisfied, I soldiered on, always climbing upwards.

As I travelled, I encountered more and more monsters. This place wasn’t like the cliché dungeon you’d expect—instead of getting stronger the deeper you went, the tougher monsters were closer to the surface. I could tell because my level kept going up—the pace had slowed, probably because the amount of experience needed to reach the next level increased each time. If I was still down there killing minotaurs and bird-heads, it would’ve probably plateaued a long time ago.

“Neeeeeih!”

A half-horse, half-carnivorous plant appeared out of the darkness, charging at me with a strange, high-pitched battle cry. It looked ridiculous from a distance, and even more unsettling as it got closer. It spewed acid from its mouth, and even its stupid appearance couldn’t hide that it wanted to kill me.

“Paralyze.”

It’s coming to kill me.

“Poison.”

I left a mountain of monster corpses in my wake.

“Sleep.”

Kill. Kill. Kill.

I kept an eye on the crystal set into my leather pouch. As soon as the color changed, I poured in my mana, and finally my third gift arrived—yakisoba bread and a box of vegetable juice, vitamins my body was longing for. I didn’t know who to thank, but I thanked them all the same.

Dinner’s over. Get up. Keep walking.

Walk. Walk. Walk.

My mind grew dull and my body itched all over.

Should I use some of the green tea to wash...? No, it’s too valuable to waste.

I found a hole in the wall and slept. I took out the bone fragments I’d stored in my pouch and laid them around the area. The biggest danger was being attacked or ambushed in my sleep, but luckily, I only had one close call and my alarm system did its job and woke me up. I killed the monsters, leveled up, and continued on my way.

Find monsters. Kill them. Check the pouch. Same pattern, day in and day out. It’s all so simple.

Don’t think.

Don’t rationalize.

Your thoughts...

Your feelings...

Paralyze them.

I raised my head.

“...”

“What is this place...?”

This area looked different. The Ruins of Disposal...I’d been wondering when I’d see some ruins instead of unending natural caves.

Now, a collection of earthy, ivy-covered buildings stood before me.

I guess people used to live down here.

“Finally...actual ruins.” The change in scenery reinvigorated my sluggish mind.

“I wonder if the ivy’s edible...huh?”

Something’s coming.

The monster that floated into view was a single, unblinking eye with a few humanlike limbs sprouting from it. The black pupil was surrounded by a deep gold iris, and it frantically twitched in all directions.

Of course, acid spurted from its pores.

Huh, guess I haven’t left the monsters behind.

The eyeball let out a high-pitched howl...why was it making that noise? It convulsed, and magic circles appeared around its wrists like bracelets that didn’t fit. They looked like the ones that the foul Goddess used to stop Oyamada and Yasu from fighting.

“Paralyze.”

I struck first.

“Poison.”

A strong electric shock shook the monster—the magic circles must’ve backfired, just like that lizardman’s attack. The monster stopped moving, smoke rising from its fallen body.

I waited for it to die. The Paralyze gauge began to run low.

“Sleep.”

The monster closed its giant, heavy-lidded eye, and died minutes later.

Level up!

Level 957 → Level 961

Still going up. Is the limit 999 or can I go over a thousand?

I looked around.

“I should take a look around.” I searched through the nearby area, keeping a close eye out for more monsters.

Who knows how much further it is to the surface. It'd be nice to find somewhere to spend the night...

I found some doors in the ruins, but they were all closed tight. They didn't budge no matter how hard I pushed and pulled.

“Hm? This crystal...”

There was a crystal on the door that looked a bit like the one on my pouch.

“So I'm supposed to pour mana into this thing?”

The gauge began to fill.

Oh, I should check my mana.

“Status open.”

MP: + 31345 / 31713

Now I can see how much I'm using.

I watched the number tick slowly down. After I'd used 1500 MP, the door slid open with a quiet rumble. I cautiously stepped inside.

“Huh, it's pretty spacious in here.” There was a stone chair and dining table, a few other pieces of furniture, and a ragged blanket in the corner.

Did someone live down here? Not anymore, I guess.

I sat in the stone chair.

“Hmm... This is nice.” It'd been a long time since I'd sat in a chair.

I really miss civilization.

“Okay.” I stood back up and went over to the door—the crystal was deactivated. I stepped out, poured another 1500 MP into the crystal, and the door rumbled shut.

“Guess you need to use mana every time you open and close this thing.”

I decided to check the other rooms. The next one was empty other

than a few pieces of the same makeshift stone furniture. I searched through seven nearly-identical rooms before I came across anything noteworthy.

“I guess other people have made it this far, too.”

Two skeletons were slumped over in a sitting position. Judging by their clothes and rusted armor, they were a boy and a girl. They were still holding hands, and looked like they’d been leaning together when they died.

When did the Goddess dispose of them? They must’ve run here, barely escaped with their lives, and were trapped here by the monsters outside. With no food or water, they chose to end it here, together.

There were no signs of a struggle—they’d accepted their fates.

“You two should be proud of how far you got,” I said to the skeletons, then started going through their belongings.

This was no time to be sentimental. If they had something I could use, I had to take it from them. I couldn’t leave them in peace—not unless I wanted to end up like they did. There was a rusted sword leaning against the wall, and a bent staff with a broken crystal.

“Nothing...”

I was used to running around in my uniform and black overcoat, so I was all set for clothes. The two dead heroes’ clothes were just as beat up as mine, anyway—not much cleaner, either.

“Hm?”

One of them had a small pouch in their pocket. I fished it out—it was heavy in my hand.

“Jewels...?”

It was filled to the brim with sparkling blue gemstones and silver pieces.

If I ever make it to the surface, maybe I can use these. I hope they’re still worth something...after all, money makes the world go ’round. Even other worlds.

“Sorry, but I have to take this,” I apologized to the two skeletons as I tucked the pouch into my back pocket.

This proves one thing—if I close the door, the monsters can’t get in. It’s a safe zone. Maybe the monsters around here can’t pour mana into objects

like I can? Or they're just not smart enough to know that doors open, I guess.

In any case, I'd found a safe place to sleep. My leather pouch promised a safe supply of food and water.

"I could use this place as a base and level here for a while..."

I considered my options as I explored the rest of the area. I ran into another eyeball monster that hadn't noticed me yet, so I ambushed it with a Paralyze from the cover of the ruins.

Next up, Poison. Once the paralysis gauge gets low, Sleep.

The monster died after two cycles.

Level up!

All right, that means my mana's maxed out again. The monsters I'm fighting still make my level shoot up when I kill them. I should bring my level up as high as possible before I reach the surface.

On the other hand, my skill levels hadn't risen at all.

I guess my skills are amazing already—can't expect them to grow that fast. I wonder if that's on purpose...maybe skill increases are super rare because a whole new feature gets added at every new level?

I kept exploring the ruins. There were 24 rooms total, laid out in a logical pattern. I chose an empty one as my base of operations and rested for a while.

"I'd better get back to it."

I started leveling. There were a lot of those eyeball monsters around, so I started hunting down stragglers that had wandered off on their own. After hunting for what I guessed was about a day, they seemed to have scattered. I went back to base to check on my pouch's crystal—still grey.

I decided to descend one level on the spiral staircase—I finished monsters with my usual combo until I cleared out that area, too. I headed back to base, saw that the crystal was lime green again, and poured in mana until a pack of cereal bars and a bottle of oolong tea popped out.

I recognized the packaging, and for a moment, I forgot I was in

another world.

“Fruit flavor, huh? These are pretty good.”

I tore one open, took a bite, and chewed gently, savoring the taste. The soft bar melted away in my mouth. The mild sweetness took over all my senses. It dried out my mouth a little, though.

No time for hesitation. Deploy oolong tea.

I gulped heavily and winced as the sweetness was washed away by a bitter wave of tea. The liquid made the dry cereal bar easier to swallow.

Not bad. It's not exactly a three-course meal, but I kinda like eating this stuff.

After dinner, I ripped up the paper packaging the cereal bars came in and used it to brush my teeth. Then I scattered the bone fragments in front of the door as an extra precaution. I didn't really think anything was going to get through; otherwise all the doors wouldn't have still been sealed when I got there. But it never hurts to be extra careful.

I took a few minutes to quiet my racing thoughts and convince myself that I was safe. Soon, I fell into my first peaceful sleep in a long time.

When I awoke, I went to find more monsters to kill in the areas below.

How much time has passed? A week? Three days? Just twelve hellish hours?

My body clock was completely out of whack. The only way to mark the passage of time was that I got hungry and tired after a while. The crystal on my leather pouch was unpredictable—I'd expected it to refresh every 24 hours, but it seemed more irregular than that. Since I started leveling, the pouch had sent me three gifts—a tuna mayonnaise rice ball, a pack of tuna sashimi, and some pork soup in a plastic container. The sashimi was cold like it was right out of the fridge, and the soup tasted freshly made. I also received a bottle of green tea and a nutritional energy drink, but the sashimi didn't come with a beverage, so I supposed I wasn't guaranteed one every time. There also wasn't any soy sauce, but the tuna sashimi still tasted incredible.

The pork soup was a surprise, too—it was the only item that didn't come in branded convenience store packaging.

Who made this soup for me...? Well, no way to figure that out now. At least my food and water problem is solved.

I slept for a while; then I went out to do some experiments.

I found that the range of Paralyze was about 20 meters, and the range of Sleep was a little smaller. I also discovered that Paralyze didn't fully immobilize my enemies—they could still move a little, enough to moan or cry out. The star of the show, Poison, had a range a little smaller than Paralyze, too.

First skill range test: complete.

I ran my tests on every monster I came across, until after a while they thinned out, then disappeared. I couldn't even feel their presences.

Did I kill them all, or are they just hiding like those minotaurs and bird-heads?

"Status Open."

Too-ka Mimori

Level 1229

HP: +3687 MP: +40237 / 40557

Attack: +3687 Defense: +3687 Vitality: +3687

Speed: +3687 Intelligence: +3687

Title: E-Class Hero

That's pretty high...I'm over a thousand already. If I head down any deeper, it'll be hard to make it back to base. And the monsters on the upper levels are stronger, anyway...

"I think it's time to head to the surface for real."

I went back to the ruins to prepare for my ascent.

I tore some vines off one of the buildings, knitted two of them together to make a thick rope, and yanked it hard to test its strength.

"Seems strong enough."

I tied the rope around my leather pouch and slung it across my shoulder.

Now I can keep my hands free while I'm carrying this thing.

“All right. Time to get moving.”

Before sleeping, I'd ripped off a scrap of my uniform, soaked it in green tea, and tried to wash a little. It didn't do much, but I felt a little refreshed.

I left my ruin base behind and started walking.

“I'd like to think that these ruins mean I'm near the surface, but who knows?”

I walked through the empty ruins in silence. I'd found an upward slope at one end of the cave while exploring the area, so I headed in that direction.

“This path feels manmade, not like the caves before...huh?”

Just as I was leaving the area, I glimpsed another path. It was dark, secluded, and blocked by thick vines.

“How did I miss this before...?”

I swept the vines aside and pushed my way into the tunnel.

Before me was a familiar-looking crystal.

“I guess there was one more room...”

I poured mana into the crystal until the door slid open.

Hey, that was 5000 MP! Why does this door cost so much?

I stepped inside and immediately covered my mouth against the cloud of dust I kicked up. I held up my glowing pouch to look around. It looked just the same as the rest—empty, no signs of life, with the same dull stone furniture.

So, that was a big waste of mana. Does getting into pointless rooms cost more than the good ones...?

I froze. There, in the back of the room, was a robed skeleton sitting cross-legged against the wall.

“Oh...it must've been a real struggle to get this far, fellow hero. Nice work. I really mean it. Good job making it all this way.”

I looked closer at the skeleton—the ribs on one side were cracked and splintered.

Is that how they died?

I clapped my hands together in apology, then started going

through the skeleton's belongings. I noticed old scraps of paper with writing on them scattered on the floor, and stooped to pick them up.

"Though I probably won't be able to read whatever language—oh." I took a closer look. "Okay, I can read this. Nice."

That Goddess must've done something to let us all understand other languages.

"Hmm... Let's see..."

"I wonder if anybody will ever read this, since I'm leaving it in the Ruins of Disposal. I suppose I should start with my name—Anglin Bathrad. People call me 'The Great Sage Anglin,' but you might know me by my past name—"

"Huh?"

"Anglin, Hero of Darkness."

I'd heard that name before...the Goddess had compared him to Yasu when he got tested, or at least I thought so. She'd seemed kind of upset thinking about him, too—maybe she had some regrets about what happened? Did Anglin go against her or get in her way?

When you hear the name "Hero of Darkness," you picture some evil guy. I figured that was why the Goddess seemed annoyed with him...but maybe I read that wrong.

Why is he the "Hero of Darkness," anyway? Did he have an ability that let him control the dark?

"This paints the ruins in a different light, though..."

The Goddess said she sent dangerous criminals down here, but...did any of them actually do anything wrong?

I went back to the letter.

"The Goddess Vicius forced me down here. No doubt I'd become a thorn in her side and she wanted to be rid of me."

"I knew it."

"I'm low on ink, so I'll spare you the details of my capture and imprisonment. If you are trying to escape the ruins alive, then I leave my possessions to you. Take whatever you need. I think it won't be long until..."

The ink, which had been fading with every word, finally stopped. There were a few scratch marks where the sage had tried to write more

but hadn't managed it. Maybe he was just too weak to keep writing. I crumpled the edge of the parchment in rage.

"That...foul Goddess."

She called the Demon King the Lord of Evil, right? Maybe that's true... but the Goddess is evil, too. And it's not like I'm trying to save the world from either of them. I'm just in it for my own survival, and my own revenge. Guess that puts me on the evil side, too.

A three-way battle, and all three sides are evil. Then what's the point? Heroes are supposed to save the world...

"But I'm no hero."

There's nothing heroic about surviving at all costs or getting my vengeance. The Great Sage Anglin's dying words said, "if you are trying to escape the ruins alive..." Well, I am. So I'm gonna take all his stuff.

There was a sack lying next to the skeleton—it was full of holes and too worn to be worth taking, but there was something heavy inside.

I reached in and pulled out an old book, thick and heavy like an encyclopedia. It was worn, but the binding was still strong. I could still make out the title.

Forbidden Arts: The Complete Works.

"Forbidden arts...?"

I opened the tome and started reading. I could read the words, but...I didn't understand what any of it meant.

"I'll try to figure it out..." I scanned the page again and tried to focus.

"Hmm..."

At a glance, it doesn't seem like it'll teach me attack skills or magic spells—it's more like alchemy, I guess?

There were lists of recipes for medicines and magic tools, some of which looked like they'd be useful. I tucked the old book under my arm.

I kept searching. There were some broken tools scattered on the ground, but none of them seemed worth taking.

Last, I found three old, worn scrolls of parchment, neatly rolled and tied with string.

"Are these maps or something...?"

I untied the strings and spread them on the ground.

“What are they...?”

They weren’t maps—they were covered with writing, but this time I couldn’t understand a word of it. All three were the same—unreadable.

“So heroes can’t just read every language, then.”

Maybe I could find someone who can read ancient languages? They look important...

“Hm?”

A scrap of paper slipped from one of the scrolls and drifted down to the floor.

This one, I could read.

Scrolls of Forbidden Magic.

“That...sounds like a big deal.” My mind raced. “If I can find an ally who can read these...maybe we can use them to take down the Goddess.”

I thought back to the last time I faced her. My status effect skill didn’t even touch her—that “Dispel Bubble” or whatever had blocked them completely.

I only believed that my skills were worthless in the first place because they didn’t work against the Goddess. But...for all I know, she’s the only one in the world they don’t work on. I need some other kind of power to fight her.

“Forbidden magic...”

If I had a forbidden magic caster on my side, maybe we could take her down. The Great Sage Anglin must have hidden these scrolls down here for a reason—they must be powerful.

I stuffed them into my bag, then did a final sweep of the room. I decided to take the Great Sage’s robes—my black overcoat had taken a beating, and the robes seemed durable.

Black robes for the Hero of Darkness, huh? Perfect for hiding in the shadows.

I changed into Anglin’s robes and dressed his skeleton in my overcoat. It felt wrong to leave him exposed.

“Sorry about this... I hope you don’t mind the trade.”

Then I picked up *Forbidden Arts: The Complete Works*.

The Great Sage Anglin, Hero of Darkness...that Goddess called him a supreme warrior, right? Why didn’t he make it to the surface, then? What blocked his path that even he couldn’t beat?

I looked up at the ceiling.

“There’s something up there.” I glanced back at the Great Sage.
“Dead men tell no tales, huh?”

As I made my way out of the room, I opened my pouch to put away the old tome.

That’s when I saw it—the last pages were dirty, liked they’d been soaked with something...

Blood red.

“Wh-what the hell...?”

I opened to the final pages and froze in shock. There were hastily scrawled, deranged scribbles, made by a man possessed. This wasn’t the calm, refined text I read on the other parchment.

The Great Sage did write that he was running out of ink...so he used something else to write his final warning.

Blood.

“Beware the Soul Eater!”

Chapter 4: Soul Eater

The Runaway

SHE MADE HER WAY cautiously through the forest, searching for a hiding place. She needed to find somewhere safe enough to finally get some rest.

Glancing downward, she saw her reflection in a puddle of water at her feet. Not her true reflection—she usually changed her face with the power of the spirits, hoping to throw off her pursuers. She'd been a bit too relaxed during her bath earlier, allowing her disguise to wear off, but she used her powers to put it back on as soon as she realized her mistake. She shut her eyes, frustrated at her own sloppiness.

I may have escaped those hunters for the time being, but there is always the danger that someone will recognize me. Even deep in the forest, I cannot be sure that no one is watching. I must learn from my mistake and make sure it never happens again...

She remembered well the failure that sent her on the run. She hadn't been careful enough—she'd avoided trouble for so long that her guard had started to drop. She'd stopped in a village, and in a tiny lapse she let her disguise slip and someone saw her true face. Unfortunately, that person turned out to be one of a four-man mercenary squad, renowned throughout the continent for their fighting skills. They were clearly adversaries to avoid fighting head-on. She'd changed her face again and fled the village, doing everything she could to throw them off her trail. Her body and clothes were harder to disguise, though—her shapeshifting ability was limited to her head. Clothes were one thing, but the distinguishing features of her body were impossible to hide.

Getting away from these four mercenaries was going to take a lot more than just disguising her face, she'd feared.

Her fears had turned out to be well-founded—the mercenaries hunted her relentlessly through every twist and turn she tried to throw in their way. Finally, just yesterday, she'd managed to lose them in the forest. She was far off track from where she'd intended to travel, but at

least the mercenary problem was solved.

She reached into her breast pocket to check the money inside.

I am unsure how much longer this will last me...

Then she grasped the charms around her neck.

Living like this in the forest forever...might not be so bad.

She walked on cautiously, all her senses straining to catch anything dangerous.

If I find a safe spot, I wonder if I should just stay here—

Suddenly, her thoughts were interrupted—there was something up ahead.

She crept on, threading her way through the trees until she reached a clearing.

Ruins...?

She looked at them with cautious optimism.

Perhaps there are hidden rooms...even a safe place to sleep.

Deciding to investigate further, she stepped carefully toward the ruins.



Mimori Touka

I LEFT THE RUINS BEHIND and continued my climb upwards.

“The Soul Eater, huh...”

Whatever that was, it was an enemy that even the Hero of Darkness couldn’t get past. Even someone that strong had only made it as far as the ruins before he was mortally wounded—at least, that was my best guess about what had happened.

Can I get past this Soul Eater thing without fighting it? Probably not, if the Great Sage couldn’t. I’m sure he was way more powerful than I am...

I looked down at my hands.

“I hope my status effect skills work against it.”

They hadn’t worked against the Goddess—that still worried me. If there were other creatures around who were immune to my abilities, I was done for. I had to hope that the Goddess was the only one with that kind of resistance.

This Soul Eater managed to kill the Hero of Darkness... If I can kill it with my skills, it’ll be a real confidence boost...

I climbed two more sets of stairs, encountering no monsters on the way. The path was stone, carved with careful and deliberate strokes. There were signs of human civilization everywhere. This wasn’t always a place for the Goddess to toss out heroes she didn’t want.

“Kinda sucks that this place got stuck with the name ‘Ruins of Disposal.’”

I pressed myself up against the wall of the passageway and peeked out into the area beyond. There was a wider room up ahead, and light of some kind.

Huh. The walls are glowing like they’re reacting to mana...

In any case, I didn’t need my leather pouch lantern for the moment.

The huge chamber was lined with ruined buildings, their walls crumbling like they’d been caught in an earthquake. Massive pillars

supported the ceiling, though several had cracked or collapsed long ago.

Four skeletons were slumped against a pillar to my right.

So other people have made it this far...along with the Hero of Darkness, that makes five. Were they all working together? I can imagine how strong fighters with enough food and water could make it here, or someone with abilities that let them run away quickly or sneak around unnoticed.

It's such a shame...they made it all this way, just to fall at the last moment...

I shook my head. This was no time to get emotional.

I kept searching the area and found two large stone staircases lining the back of the room, leading up to a large door.

Will that take me to the surface? But if it does, it'll also lead me to... the Soul Eater. What could that be, anyway? Is it, like, a ghost?

I couldn't see any monsters nearby that fit that description. I looked cautiously around the room.

There.

It was hard to make out from my current vantage point, but it looked like there was an open area further back. I doubled back and put down my leather pouch against one of the faintly glowing walls of the hallway I came in through.

I don't want that Soul Eater thing to see me coming.

I returned to the room with the large door and made my way slowly, keeping my back to the wall at all times. I peeked out into the dim light of this new room from behind a large stone pillar.

What's this room for, anyway—?

A face...?

There was a huge stone face carved into the earthen wall in the center of the room with a giant gold crystal set into its forehead. It reminded me of a Buddha statue, or the Virgin Mary—the kind of statue you'd make of a revered figure.

I looked back toward the door. I'd overlooked it at first, but... there was a hole in the door that was the exact same size and shape as the crystal.

I looked back down at the stone face.

I get it now... You've gotta take the crystal and put it in the door, huh?

“...”

I let out a breath. I was pretty sure I knew where this was going.

That's the Soul Eater, isn't it? If I try to take that crystal, it's going to move.

I shifted a little to get a good angle on the stone face and stretched out my hand towards it.

“Pa—”

Kzzzzzk!

I yanked my arm back reflexively.

“Aah?! Aaah!!”

Blood dripped onto the floor below.

“Ngh...ouch!”

I got out of the way just in time! Even a moment later and it would've taken my arm off!

I checked the bleeding.

Okay...I'm okay. It took off some fingernails and skin...hurts about as much as ripping off a nail. It's fine.

My real parents had torn off my fingernails before—
I was used to pain like this. I pulled out a scrap of fabric from my robes and wrapped it around my fingers.

What was that...?

It had looked almost like Kirihara's unique skill, a beam attack. The wall glowed brightly, there was a flash of light, and then it hit me instantly.

At the speed of light, more like. That stone face must know I have to say my skill names before I use them—I'm predicting its moves, but it's reading me right back. It'll happen again the moment I try to attack, I bet.

So...how do I use my skills?

What do I do? I need that crystal, and I need to kill the stone face to get it...but how? With that beam pointed at me, I can't get through a single syllable.

While testing out my skills on my climb through the caves, I'd discovered that I always need to say the names out loud to activate them—even whispering wasn't enough.

How do I beat it, then? Do I need to level up more? I could try to pick up a new skill by starting right back at the beginning and working my way back up...

No, that wouldn't solve the issue—if I don't have time to speak, I can't use any skill. Do I just need to be faster? Raise my speed stat? Maybe I should go back to the ruins and hunt some monsters...or even further?

Or I could just live in these ruins forever, right?

"No way in hell."

I'm not wasting my life in this hole. I'm finding a way out, then I'm going to crush that Goddess.

Rrrrrumble...

"What's that...?"

The stone wall opposite me began to crumble.

It's coming for me. I didn't make a move, so it's coming for me.

It sounded like the stone face had torn itself off the wall and crashed to the ground.

Its attacks are as fast as light...does that just mean that its speed stat is way higher than mine? As soon as I raised my arm, it struck. Maybe it just doesn't hesitate or even stop to think, unlike the other monsters I've fought. It isn't taking any chances.

I looked down at my bleeding hand.

The heroes who made it here before me must've had incredible stats, but they all lost to this thing, even the Hero of Darkness. This Soul Eater is why nobody leaves these ruins alive. It's the master of the ruins, the final boss. This is it.

It hasn't tried a second beam attack yet. Is it powerful enough to break down the pillars? That thing must know I'm hiding here, so why hasn't it taken another shot?

Squelch...

"Huh...?"

A large wad of sludge landed a few feet from my hiding place.

What is that stuff? Did the Soul Eater shoot it at me?

The sludge oozed and welled up, forming itself into...three human shapes.

They looked like intricately detailed clay models, sculpted in moments before my eyes. I was used to seeing humanoids in these ruins, but these were different. Their heads were bizarre and unsettling, like human lips turned on their side.

From the shaking of the floor, I could tell the Soul Eater was slowly but surely moving closer.

“Okay, first I’ve gotta paralyze these gross th—”

Gloop.

“Huh...?”

Three pairs of lips opened, and three pale, bloodless, crying human faces emerged.

They look like they’re in agony, overwhelmed by despair...

I finally understood. The Soul Eater was no different from the lizardmen I’d fought earlier, acting out the deaths of the heroes they’d killed. These faces of agony, right before death...they were the Soul Eater’s trophies. It was showing them to me, taunting me, begging for a reaction.

This was all just a game to the Soul Eater.

Sweat rolled down my forehead. My mouth twitched into a faint smile.

“You... You monsters are all the same... Barbarians, all of you...”

The sludge zombies trudged closer, their crying faces staring at me wordlessly.

Drip. Drip.

It was like...their faces were almost calling out to me, begging me to save them from their torment.

I took a step backwards.

“Y-you’ve gotta be kidding me...”

These weren’t like the monsters I’d faced on the earlier levels. I’d fought humanoid monsters before, but never anything that looked this much like *people*.

“Th-they’re so... I can’t...”

Maybe it was wrong for me to feel so emotional, but it hit me hard in that moment.

The wall to my left collapsed and the giant stone face appeared out of the dust. It was floating, with a mass of tentacles like catfish whiskers writhing behind it, a giant lump of meat, stone, and earth. The tentacles were thick, black, and squirming like a sea anemone, with a faint gold tint—they must have been the source of that beam attack.

The Soul Eater closed its stony eyes, and red liquid started pouring from the slits like tears of blood. It opened its mouth wide and more blood came pouring out.

The sickening sound of the stone face vomiting blood reverberated in my ears along with the Soul Eater’s battle cry, an unbearable, piercing sound straight out of a horror movie. When the screaming finally stopped, the Soul Eater opened its eyes a little and its bloody mouth curled into a smile. Its gold eyes were overflowing with heartless laughter.

“I can’t believe it...”

It’s enjoying this...

Still, I couldn’t find a window to make my attack. I couldn’t see any way of beating it. There was no chink in the Soul Eater’s armor—the moment I tried to attack it’d blow me away with that beam attack, probably taking an arm or a leg with it.

The sludge zombies’ footsteps squelched closer.

“Y-you monster...! Playing with people’s souls like this...”

The creatures dripped with nauseating purple liquid as they advanced toward me. I held out my arm.

“Nh...! Par—”

I could feel its eyes on me. Sweating hard, my robes clinging to my body, I opened my eyes, gritted my teeth, and yelled.

“Paralyze!”

It worked—no beam attack. The three zombies stopped in their tracks. The Soul Eater looked on indifferently.

Is it ignoring me because I didn’t target it directly?

Breathing hard, I stared uncomfortably at the three frozen zombies. “N-next...” My voice shook. The people’s faces were crying and begging for relief.

“P-poi...so—! Aaaah!”

I screamed and looked up at the ceiling.

“I... I can’t do it...! Even if they’re half dead, these things...they look human...! Poisoning them would be too cruel, dammit!”

I felt tears welling up.

Those are heroes who went through hell just to die in this godforsaken place...they’re...

“They’re just like me...!”

I turned towards the Soul Eater with all the hate I could muster.

“I-I’m not that far gone yet! I don’t play with people’s souls like you do! I can’t—I *won’t*—use poison against another human. I won’t do it! Those human faces...they aren’t like you monsters, they didn’t do anything wrong!”

Tears were streaming down my cheeks.

“I’m still human...!”

The face contorted in joy, baring its stone teeth in a wide grin.

With a disgusting *slorp*, more sludge zombies appeared—there were more than twenty now. They quickly took on human shapes, opening their sideways lips to reveal human faces with horrifying expressions—then their death march began. They were trying to surround me.

Drip, Drip, Drip.

“S-stay back...!”

I covered my face with my hand, staggering back in retreat.

“N-no...”

Even if they’re just sludge monsters imprinted with human souls. Even if they’re just copies. They used to be heroes, just like me. And now they’re marching towards me—the discarded heroes of the Ruins of Disposal.

“I-I’m one of you! Listen...!”

Please. You have to listen. Show me a miracle.

My arms were shaking.

“G-get away from me...!”

I backed up toward the wall as the hordes of the dead and the Soul Eater advanced on me, the stone face smiling like the shining sun, blinding and ecstatic. Its teeth were disturbingly white in the faint glow of the room.

It's enjoying my despair...savoring it. Like it just cornered its prey to play with...it's having fun.

Pale, ghostly, human shapes appeared around the Soul Eater's body, twisting and thrashing in agony. Their eyes were black, and each mouth hung open, screaming in torment, crying out for help. It was a chorus of bound souls desperately begging for freedom.

It wants me to see this...

“This is too cruel...”

A shiver ran down my spine.

This thing is pure evil.

“Uh?!”

I felt my back hit the wall.

Nowhere to run. No will to even try.

My legs cramped—terror froze them in place.

I'm scared...too scared.

The dead crept closer, and the Soul Eater closed in. “St-Stop...!”

I was done for.

“Please, no... Don't do this, I'm begging you... Stay back... Get away from me—!”

The Soul Eater's mouth opened wide, and its tentacles squirmed and danced even more excitedly. With every move of those tentacles, I sank deeper into despair.

I tried to reach the surface on my own, tried to survive alone...but in the end, I had to ask for help.

“What the hell! Isn't this enough yet?! Somebody, *anybody*, save me! Isn't this the part where someone swoops in and rescues me? Haven't I earned that yet?”

My desperate, rageful cry echoed around the room.

“I don’t care who...anybody...somebody... Somebody save me!”

Everything I’d endured came crashing down on me like a wave.

I broke.

The Soul Eater’s grin widened, blood tears pouring from its face. I could tell exactly what it was feeling...

Euphoria!

“Paralyze.”

“Khhhh?!”

The Soul Eater had been so distracted by its gloating superiority that it let its guard down for just a moment...and that’s when I struck. I’d kept an eye on it through the fingers covering my face and locked on—I’d left my hand raised on purpose after casting Paralyze last time.

Target acquired. Arm out. That’s two of the three conditions I need to use my skills.

“Khhh...?”

The stone face’s expression fell in an instant as it froze in place. “That’s your weakness...”

I stared up at the stone face—*my prey*.



“That’s the fatal flaw of the strong and arrogant.”

It’s that moment when they’re certain they’re better, when they believe that their victory is assured. They let their guard down. They lose their caution and give me an opening to use my weapon.

Skill level up!

Level 2 → Level 3

My shaking stopped, my tears dried up. There was no need to continue the act.

The Soul Eater tried to wriggle free, clashing its teeth and twitching violently against its invisible constraints.

Its bulging eyes, bloodshot with thick golden veins, strained to glare at me.

Hate. Humiliation. Murder.

Blood dripped from its mouth. I stared back.

“I think I even deceived myself.”

A part of me really was horrified at being forced to fight something that looked human. Kind, quiet Mimori Touka is still inside me somewhere, and I used him to fool the Soul Eater.

“You love to prey on people like him, don’t you?”

The lizardmen and leopardmen were sadistic torturers who wanted me to cower pathetically before them, and I’d sensed that the Soul Eater might have the same weakness. It didn’t just want to finish me off, it wanted to show off its collection. So, I used that against it. I played the role of a pathetic weakling and let it gloat. I gave it exactly what it wanted.

Then I killed it.

Finding out for sure that my status effects worked on the Soul Eater was a big relief. A wide grin spread across my face.

“Ha ha ah...how’d you like that? I’m not a bad actor, huh, boss? I’ve had a lot of practice.”

Playing pretend. After my foster parents agreed to take me in...

“For days, months, years...”

I pretended to be harmless.

Pretended to be normal.

Pretended to be kind.

I raised my blood-soaked fingers up to the Soul Eater’s face in defiance.

“I even deceived myself.”

I’d managed to forget who I really am.

I opened my eyes wide and let out a demented laugh.

“I’ve been pretending so long to be kind, unobtrusive Mimori Touka...”

The sludge zombies that had followed and cornered me against the wall had really been lured into a formation where I could easily hit all of them.

“You thought you had me cornered...but you were the ones being trapped, not me.”

I stretched out both arms in front of me.

“Poison.”

The zombies around me began to change color.

“These zombies want me dead. Even if they were made with the souls of dead heroes...I’m not holding back.”

I have to fight evil with evil.

Murder with murder.

I’m going to crush them.

I threaded my way past the stationary zombies. Some of them were already succumbing to the poison damage, their legs melting away, bringing them to their knees before their new king.

At last, I was face to face with the Soul Eater.

“I must have the weakest stats in this whole dungeon, huh? Being at the bottom isn’t always a bad thing, though.”

The creature glared at me, its tentacles spasming and twitching as it tried in vain to move. It didn’t seem able to use its beam weapon, either.

“I’m glad I’m the weakest thing down here. That’s how I survived —by being underestimated by monsters like you.”

I made it, but so many didn’t...all the remains I found scattered along the way, the corpses used as toys by monsters, the four who made it all the way out here...and the Hero of Darkness.

Maybe I’m not really like them...maybe I can never be like them. For all I know, they wouldn’t want anything to do with me. All the heroes sent down here by that foul Goddess must’ve been good people, or she wouldn’t have gotten rid of them...

But I’m not a good person. All I want is revenge against the Goddess who did this to me. I don’t want recognition or praise. Saying I’m the same as those other heroes is probably just wishful thinking.

Honestly, I’m just pissed off... After everything they went through, the humiliation, the despair, the regret...

“It makes me so mad...”

“Khhh!!”

The souls kept captive by this monster had suffered for so long. Wasn’t dying in this place punishment enough? Even in death, their souls weren’t allowed to find peace.

I want the Soul Eater to feel it all.

Their regret.

Their humiliation.

Their despair.

“Poison.”

The Soul Eater’s face turned purple, and its tentacled body began to bubble ominously.

Skill level up!

Level 2 → Level 3

I looked straight into the monster’s murderous gaze as I slowly walked up to it, close enough to touch. The hatred radiating off the thing was palpable.

I looked down at the Soul Eater, sneering.

“You used to think the heroes thrown down here were just prey to feed on, didn’t you?”

I smiled broadly.

“How the tables have turned.” I let out a laugh. “But now you’re the one lying on the floor, gasping for air. Right, Soul Eater?”

The creature opened its mouth and stuck out its tongue. Its anger bubbled over as it tried and failed to roar.

Can this thing understand what I’m saying? I wonder if it gets what’s happening.

Its body began to convulse. Blue liquid started seeping out of it.

Is that its blood?

It seeped out onto the floor and pooled, like a new hot spring had just emerged from the ground. I retreated to a safe distance and continued watching the spectacle, feeling refreshed. I had an idea what was happening.

“Hm. Maybe monsters that try to move while they’re under paralysis take extra damage.”

Only the incredible raw strength of Soul Eater let me make field observations like that.

“This is valuable data.”

I wouldn’t have to wait for a long, slow death by poison.

I wonder if I’ll even have to use Sleep? Best if it dies quick, I guess. I don’t have all day.

The Soul Eater kept staring with fire in its eyes. The torturer never expected it’d end up on the other side of the fence.

You always believed you were the strongest thing down here, didn’t you? The other heroes who came before me who couldn’t beat the Soul Eater...but in the end, they all helped me defeat it. Their losses made the monster arrogant. Proud. The heroes who came before me led the way and laid the path to my victory with their sacrifice.

A great crack formed in the stone face. Half of it crumbled away, exposing black and pink writhing meat and blue blood within.

“Khhhhh...!”

It kept its furious eyes on me all the while. As I waited, the yellow gauge began to taper off.

“That’s enough.”

The last words I spoke weren’t to the Soul Eater, but to all the captive souls it had held in torment for so long...

“Be at peace...”

“Sleep.”

The Soul Eater breathed its last.

Level up!

Level 1229 → Level 1789

Now it was just a heap of rubble and twisted meat.

The zombies were gone too—dissolved into formless puddles of sludge on the ground next to their fallen master.

I got a few skill levels from that fight, didn’t I?

My Paralyze and Poison skills had leveled up.

Do I have to use them a set number of times before they get better? Do they improve based on the number of targets I apply them to, or is the strength of the target a factor?

There was still so much I didn’t know about my skills and how this whole system worked.

I wonder...

“When I used my abilities on the Soul Eater, did it also apply them to all the souls it was keeping captive? That’d be a lot of targets...” I didn’t feel good thinking that I might have made all those captive souls suffer my Poison ability.

“Sorry if I hurt any of you...hmm?”

The Soul Eater’s body started glowing with a pale white light.

A torrent of spirits came rushing out of its corpse, whirling up into the air. It looked like nature videos I’d seen on TV of fish schooling underwater in beautiful synchronicity. They circled above me for a moment before charging directly into the stone ceiling and floating

down in tiny flecks of pale light, like snow on a quiet winter night.

“.....”

A voice.

“Oh, hey! You met me first, right? I was so relieved when you got away from that minotaur. Nice work, man!”

I found half a skull when I first arrived in the caves.

“Apologies that my axe didn’t serve you better against those terrible four-armed bird creatures... You did well to survive. I’m proud of you.”

I came upon an axe and tried to cut through that bird-head’s tough skin with it... It didn’t work.

“Seems like my old overcoat did you some good! I can’t believe such a ratty coat of mine ended up being worn by the Great Sage! Well...thank you.”

That black overcoat I borrowed from that skeleton...

“That was a good shortsword, you know! I guess the monsters ’round here were a little too much for her, though! I was suprised to see you try to eat that minotaur eye, pfft heh heh! Thank you so much for defeating the Soul Eater...”

The shortsword I used to gouge out that minotaur’s eye...that was from a skeleton, too.

“I can’t believe you took down a zombie dragon! You kicked its butt! Great work, man! You’re awesome!”

I remembered the skull floating in the swamp back in that limestone cave.

“E-excuse me...”

A pale, transparent figure floated before me.

I recognized her dress immediately—how could I forget? She was the skeleton those lizardmen had toyed with in the caves. The girl’s spirit looked soft and kind, and it hurt to think of what had happened to her. She clenched her fists tightly.

“I-It might sound barbaric of me to say, b-but...when you gave those lizardmen a good thumping, it... It really cheered me up! Thank you for giving them a taste of their own medicine!”

She bowed, and I reflexively smiled in return.

The girl smiled back, then faded away into nothing.

“It cheered me up as well! Never thought I’d see the day those lizardmen got what was coming to them... Thank you for taking our remains out of their reach. I wish you the very best of luck on your journey, young man.”

I recognized this spirit’s clothes, too—the man those lizardmen had been mocking, pretending to be burned alive.

“U-us too! Those leopardmen did such terrible things...”

“You took apart their toys and put us to rest, didn’t you? Thank you so much. You’re a very kind person.”

The two skulls from those nunchucks the leopardman had used.

“I hope our treasures can help you when you get up to the surface. They should last you for quite some time...as long as the economy didn’t crash or anything! Anyway, use them in good health!”

“Ha ha, I can’t believe you hunted down all those monsters in the ruins, you’re incredible! Stay safe out there, won’t you? Good luck!”

A boy and a girl, holding hands—I recognized them immediately as the two skeletons lying next to each other in the sealed room.

“Last...of course it’s you,” I whispered.

Five figures appeared before me. I recognized the one standing at the head of the group.

He wore the same robes I did, after all.

It was the Great Sage Anglin, Hero of Darkness, with his four companions behind him.

“ ”

He was trying to say something, but I couldn’t hear. I caught him mouthing “thank you,” but I didn’t catch the rest. It felt like there was a mist over my eyes keeping me from understanding.

The Great Sage continued to talk, undeterred.

Soon, their forms began to fade.

“ ”

The Great Sage said something to me, then turned back to his

companions, who greeted him warmly. The whole group waved to me, more thank-yous on their lips. I raised my hand a little in response.

“...”

The Great Sage’s last words were the only ones that came across loud and clear.

“Please... must... Goddess...”

“...?”

I flinched and shook myself awake.

Did I doze off?

A wave of fatigue slammed into me.

“What was that...?”

Was I hallucinating? It’s strange...I thought I was wandering through these ruins alone, but...I was never really on my own, was I? Those who came before me were always there, quietly watching out for me.

I didn’t know the whole truth—I likely never would. But it still felt good. It was the same kind of warmth my foster parents gave me.

“...”

The last words of the Great Sage rang in my ears, echoed in unison by every soul that had been discarded in these ruins.

“Please. You must defeat that Goddess.”

“Hey, I don’t owe you guys anything. That said...you can all rest in peace.”

I made a fist with my left hand and clasped it with my right. The Goddess’s face appeared in my mind’s eye.

“It might take a while, but before I leave this world...I’m gonna settle things with that foul Goddess in my own way.”

I took the golden crystal from the Soul Eater’s corpse and slowly got to my feet. I retrieved my leather pouch and made my way up the stairs to the large door. Then, for a moment, I turned back.

“See you.”

Who am I saying goodbye to? I don't really know, myself.

I shoved the crystal into the slot in the door and it rumbled open.

The first thing that greeted me on the other side was the warm, soft light of the sun, like an old friend I hadn't seen in weeks.

Chapter 5: Avenger(s)

Sogou Ayaka

SOGOU AYAKA walked cautiously through the forest in the Southwest corner of the kingdom, keeping her eyes peeled for threats. She'd been in this new world for several days now, and she was still getting used to her new life.

Branches snapped in the underbrush nearby. She quickly jumped to attention and raised her long spear.

“Grrr... Graarh!”

It was a mouth-dog.

The creature's mouth was large, deformed, and lined with gleaming, crooked teeth. Its eyes flashed gold. Sogou had never seen anything like it before...it had never been clearer to her how far from home she was.

The dog monster took a step forward.

“Do you...want to fight?” she asked, directed as much to herself as to the monster.

“Grrh...!”

It bared its fangs.

“Where'd you run off to...?! Freakin' dog!” Oyamada Shougo's voice called out from nearby, and the rustling of leaves got louder and louder as he approached. He jumped out of the brush, swinging his greatsword.

When it saw Oyamada, the dog turned tail and dashed off in the opposite direction. Ayaka froze—at this distance, she knew she'd be able to cut it off, but...

“That one's mine, Sogou! Stay outta my way! Only the Elites get the good prey, got it?!”

Oyamada clearly didn't want her help.

“Well, I guess I could let you have it if you came with me and joined our group! Think it over, huh? You gotta think about your future!”

Leaving these condescending words hanging in the air, Oyamada disappeared into the brush. Ayaka was alone again. She checked her surroundings—not a sound to be heard—then finally let herself relax a little, and sighed.

The heroes of 2-C were working on their combat skills in a training area prepared for them on the outskirts of the kingdom. A towering stone wall surrounded an area of the forest, and then ferocious monsters, matched to their current strength, were added for them to fight.

Saving the world from evil, huh?

Ayaka sat down on a nearby rock and gripped her spear tightly. It had been several days since the Goddess first made them kill those monsters in the castle. She’d wanted them to get used to killing living things, she said. Ayaka had slept through that part, though.

By the time she woke up, the initiation ceremony was over. Some students didn’t pass the trial—no matter how hard they’d tried, they couldn’t kill their monster. Some were paralyzed, others nauseous, crying, catatonic or confused.

Of course they were.

Everyone in 2-C grew up in a peaceful world. Just the concept of taking a life with your own hands was completely foreign to them. Sogou was no exception to that, either.

When she regained consciousness, she’d gone to see the Goddess, who filled her in on what she’d missed.

To Sogou’s horror, the Goddess explained that any who couldn’t go through with their first kill soon would be *disposed of*.

“It is a true shame,” the Goddess began, “but it is *necessary*, Sogou-san. I am afraid any dropouts will have to walk the same path as our unfortunate friend Too-ka Mimori-san.”

The Goddess also briefly told her of Mimori Touka’s last moments among them. His final words sounded strange to her—not like the Mimori Touka she knew.

She...she hadn’t been able to save him.

"I am so sorry, Sougo-san. It pains me to have to do this, but these are the laws of the Kingdom of Alion, and they are absolute. I am truly sorry...but there's nothing I can do," the Goddess had said, tears welling up in her eyes.

Ayaka knew what she was trying to do.

"If I may speak freely, Goddess..."

"Yes? Speak as freely as you please."

"I don't like the way you do things. Not one bit."

"Hmm~? What do you mean by that?"

"You throw the weak away when they stop being useful to you. It's horrible."

"Ah. I suppose that's one way of looking at it~! You know, for a Goddess I am actually a generous spirit. I can even be persuaded on occasion! And yet...those who cannot fulfil their heroic roles in this world are not long for it..."

"My rank...S-Class. That means something here."

"Oh, of course! It makes you quite important!"

Ayaka had no choice. She gave the Goddess what she wanted.

"I'll fight for you...but the heroes who couldn't pass your initiation ceremony are under my protection. I'll join your side as long as you let them all stay here."

"How wonderful and courageous of you! It is a fine thing when an S-Class hero stands up for her ideals. You may have some reservations, but you are willing to put them aside to save the world!"

"Yes, I am."

"How *delightful*~! Let us shake on it, then, to celebrate our newfound friendship! Oh, and although I believe it was necessary in the moment, I *am* rather sorry for punching you in the stomach~!"

Ayaka took the Goddess's hand. It was cold as ice.

Cold hands, warm heart? Not likely.

I know I'm still confused...it's only been three days, and I don't really understand anything...

But I have to do this. I have to save them.

In Ayaka's opinion, the students who hadn't passed the initiation ceremony were some of the kindest people in class. She'd heard that Zakurogi had taken on a leadership role among them, though he was also struggling to adjust to their new reality.

At one point, when he'd tried to reassert himself as a leader and authority figure, Oyamada had given a vicious takedown.

"Ha! You really think I'm gonna accept a D-Class hero as my teacher? You can tell me to respect you, but it's not like you can back it up! Oh, by the way...sorry, but our group's gonna have to pass on you! How 'bout you go see if they need help washing dishes in the castle kitchens, Zakurogi-kun? Might be a better use of your skills!"

Ayaka had scolded Oyamada for going too far and tried to counter with something to encourage their teacher, but he just brushed past her, stumbling out of the room in shock. Since then, he seemed like a broken man.

"I have to be stronger..." she'd heard him mutter under his breath.

They'd been allowed to take whatever weapons they liked from the castle. Kiriara chose a katana, Oyamada a greatsword, Hijiri a longsword, Itsuki a rapier, and Yasu two swords to dual-wield. Swords were apparently common in this world, though they were originally brought here by summoned heroes from the past.

Ayaka had immediately gone for a spear, the weapon she was most accustomed to wielding. Her grandmother was a master of the "Kisou" style of ancient martial arts, and even after she met her wealthy husband, she continued teaching. Ayaka had been her student since she was very young. "Kisou" wasn't only spear-work—it also had techniques for times when your opponent was too close for a spear—but for most combat it was her favorite weapon.

Ayaka had studied and trained hard every day, and the lessons were her beloved routine. She'd train every night, then shower and read before bed.

Now, all that seemed so far away.

I never imagined I'd be using these techniques in a real life-or-death situation... I can't be satisfied with my pathetic accomplishments so far. An S-Class hero needs S-Class results, otherwise all the dropout students will be in danger. They'll end up like Mimori-kun...

Discarding the weak...that was *wrong*, no matter if anyone tried to convince her otherwise. The term *Noblesse oblige* came to mind. The strong have a duty to protect the weak—an obligation.

First, she had to kill some monsters and “level up.” Apparently, killing monsters would give you “experience points,” which were a kind of energy, perhaps? Kill strong monsters and you’d become powerful, too.

“Status open.”

Ayaka Sogou

Level 1

HP: +700 MP: +300

Attack: +1300 Defense: +300 Vitality: +500

Speed: +700 < +500 > Intelligence: +700

Title: S-Class Hero

The Goddess said that these stat things will increase as we level up.

Summoned heroes were the only ones in this world with this “levels” and “experience” framework applied to them—regular people and monsters couldn’t do things like check their stats.

Ayaka lightly ran her fingertips over her earrings—the bonus to her “Speed” stat was tied to them, her unique item. They’d been told that most of those special items were just raw stat boosts, and hers were no exception—she did feel a little faster than before, she thought.

Experience points...

Killing another person wouldn’t give you experience or make you level up. Ayaka supposed that made sense—you wouldn’t want heroes going on murderous rampages across the kingdom, killing the people they were meant to protect. She shook her head at the disturbing image.

Instead, they had to stick to killing monsters to level up. The monsters apparently came in a few different types, and the ones that gave the most EXP had golden eyes. Unsurprisingly, they were also the strongest and hardest to kill.

Let me see, what else...

She opened her skill list, already getting used to the flicking motions required.

The words *Unique Skill* were displayed in grey, as they always were.

Will I be able to use magic spells someday?

She hadn't killed a single monster yet, and was still stuck at level 1.

Can I really do it...? No, I don't have a choice. I couldn't save Mimori Touka, but...I have to save the others. I won't let that Goddess take anyone else. I'll protect the powerless so that Mimori Touka didn't die in vain.

I need to find another one of those monster things.

Ayaka got back to her feet and began to walk.

She wasn't wearing her uniform anymore. In its place was an outfit right out of a fantasy movie—flashy armor that accentuated her figure a bit more than she was comfortable with. It was beautiful and elaborate...and Ayaka had spent last night carefully adding fabric to the more over-exposed areas.

"This kind of armor gives a real advantage against enemies of the opposite sex," the Goddess had told her. "It also makes it easier for the mana to flow through your body! We spared no expense designing the most useful and attractive S-Class equipment!"

I wonder if she was telling the truth. This is just so embarrassing...

Ayaka hated feeling exposed—that was why she always wore black tights with her uniform. She had to admit, though, that her ordinary school uniform wouldn't provide much defense against monster claws. The armor had some sort of magical protection from the Goddess on it, apparently. Right now, it was vital to her defense.

I'll have to grin and bear it for the time being.

She kept walking, a little dejectedly.

Heroes, are we?

The word still didn't sit right with her. Get called a hero, and it's like you have no choice but to work up some bravery and go off to fight evil. But she didn't feel very heroic.

Hero...that word's just a magic spell she cast on us to stop us from running away.

To Ayaka, it felt like a curse.

She stopped and readied her spear, sensing something close by.

“Haah, Haah... Oh! S-Sogou-san!”

“Kashima-san...?”

She’s a member of Ikusaba Asagi’s group, I think. We’ve all been neatly separated into groups already, haven’t we...? Factions, just like in the classroom. Some things never change.

“What’s wrong?”

“I-I was told to give you a message...!” Kashima choked out, still panting.

“Catch your breath, *then* tell me. I’ll wait, I promise.”

“Sorry... Th-thank you...”

Kashima Kobato has always been one of our quieter classmates, but if she’s here...

Kobato must have passed the Goddess’s initiation ceremony.

She doesn’t look like she’d hurt a fly...maybe Ikusaba-san did something to get her through it.

I...don’t trust Ikusaba Asahi. She always seems like she’s up to something.

Kobato’s breathing slowed enough for her to speak.

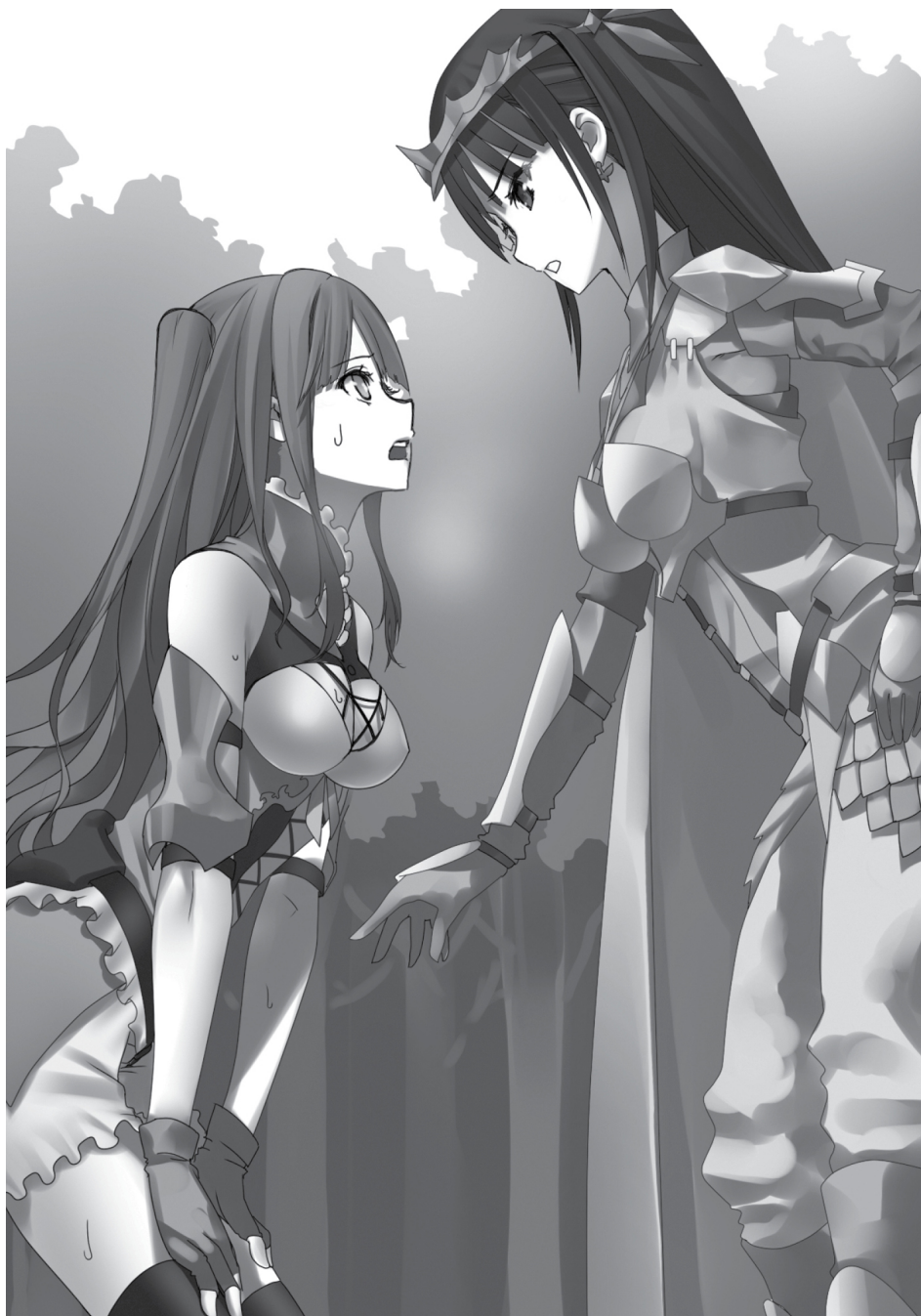
“Um... Th-there’s a really strong cow-man monster that got mixed in with the others by mistake... One of the people at the castle told me and... M-maybe we should all head back...” she panted.

Kobato isn’t in great shape, and she’s timid...but she still came out here to warn me.

“Did you really run all this way just to tell me? Thank you, Kashima-san.”

“Y-yes... B-because we need you, Sogou-san. You have to live...”

Ayaka just stared at her. It sounded like Kashima didn’t think that she herself was needed at all.



“Kashima-san?” A shiver ran up Ayaka’s spine at Kobato’s tone. The other girl stared intently over Ayaka’s shoulder—she slowly raised one arm to point.

“B-behind you...”

Ayaka turned.

“Grrrrraaagh!”

It was a man with the head of a cow. Its body was small, but its presence was overwhelming and terrifying. Its golden eyes flashed in the sun.

With a roar, the beast charged.

“Kashima-san, get behind me! Stay back, I’ll handle it!”

“B-but...”

“It’s fine! Just do it!”

“Okay!”

Ayaka readied her spear.

Can I really do this?

She took a deep breath and tried to calm her pounding heart. As she locked eyes with her opponent, she remembered her grandmother’s words.

“Presence of mind and timing. Those are the keys.”

The creature was almost upon her, and...

Thunk!

As it charged, Ayaka gracefully hooked her spear under the creature’s arm, throwing it off balance. She quickly twisted her body around the monster, using the spear as an axis to throw it to the ground over her back, momentarily making a cross shape with her own body.

“Kisou style...Cross Drop!” she shouted by sheer force of habit. Ayaka had always been taught to say the names of her techniques as she performed them as a way of visualizing what she wanted to do. This technique used the power of your opponent against them, similar to Aikido.

The cow-headed man crashed hard onto its back, stuck firm into the ground with the spear. The creature gurgled as its mouth foamed

with blood, its body still in shock from the impact and injury.

I did it.

Ayaka looked down at the monster with a horrified expression on her face. She pulled her spear out and held the tip to the creature's neck.

I have to kill it. I have to...if I want to get stronger, I...

She gripped the spear and prepared to strike...

"Get out the way, Sogou!"

"Huh?"

She was knocked aside and fell to the ground.

"Gaah!"

In her place stood Kirihara Takuto, holding his hand out toward the motionless creature.

"Dragon Buster!"

The cow-man was engulfed in a wide golden beam of light.

"All right, that's...level 18," Kirihara said, panting.

Ayaka stared, stunned at what just happened.

"Sogou-san...was that...?" Kobato asked, her voice shaking.

Kirihara let out a sigh, then looked over at Ayaka with his usual cool expression.

"Thanks for the help."

What? Help...?

Kirihara sighed again, exasperated.

"That was a close one. You've gotta be more careful, Sogou."

He turned and walked away, disappearing into the trees.

"What just happened...?" Kobato wondered aloud, still in a little shock.

"Scum."

Kobato jolted to attention at the voice of Takao Hijiri, who was suddenly standing right beside her.

Ayaka shook her head, realization dawning. Kirihara had just stolen her experience points.

“You don’t hide how you feel, do you, Hijiri-san?” Ayaka said.

“Are you really going to let him get away with that?”

“I don’t want to rock the boat unless I have to. I don’t think Kiri-hara-kun has figured out how to deal with this new situation yet, either. That’s why he’s being so—”

“That naïve attitude is going to get you killed someday, Sogou-san,” Hijiri interrupted.

“Maybe you’re right.”

“I don’t like that about you.”

“I know.”

“Well...”

Hijiri turned on her heels.

“I suppose it isn’t your worst quality, either. I simply don’t have room to admire that sort of thing.”

Leaving that mysterious statement hanging in the air, she too walked off into the forest.

Ayaka and Kobato got to their feet and headed back to meet up with the other students. They walked until they came to a clearing, a stark break in the canopy above, and saw dark clouds gathering in the sky far in the distance.

Perhaps we’re all going to end up fighting over these golden-eyed monsters...I hope we don’t turn on each other.

In Sogou Ayaka’s heart, rain clouds were also beginning to form.

That day, Alion received news of the Demon King’s army’s movements. The great Northern fortress of the Magnar Kingdom, the Nightwall, had fallen. The armies of the Demon King had halted after taking down the great rock of the North, and there were no signs that they were advancing further yet.

News of the unrest spread through the continent like wildfire, and each country scrambled to prepare for invasion.

Three days after finishing her training in the woods, that news would reach Sogou Ayaka.

Mimori Touka

FINALLY, I EMERGED from the inescapable Ruins of Disposal.

Time to take a nice, long rest and soak up this sunlight for a while?

Nope.

I remembered what that foul Goddess had told me.

“I dispatch a scouting party to the ruins’ entrance periodically to check on a secret marker that will show me if anyone has escaped...but that marker has never been activated.”

I carefully peeked out, hiding myself in the shadows of the large stone pillars surrounding the entrance. I couldn’t see any watchtowers or guards.

The scouting party isn’t always here, then...I should check around the entrance while I have the chance.

My search didn’t turn up anything, though. This secret marker was hidden somewhere I couldn’t find it. It was only a matter of time before she figured out I escaped.

The door to the ruins had slammed shut behind me as soon as I stepped out into the sunlight, like it was telling me to *get out and stay out!* Maybe I’d killed too many of its monsters and it wanted to be rid of me.

It’s too bad—I wanted to go get that golden crystal and try to sell it. You can’t always get what you want, I guess.

The area outside was dotted with abandoned buildings, like the grand ancient ruins you’d see in a history textbook. I quickly scanned the area—the ruins were in a clearing surrounded by forest. I decided to move away from the exit as soon as possible. I’d already said my goodbyes, after all.

After picking a random direction and walking for a little while, I came across a bare dirt path that looked like it was used by people fairly recently. I considered taking it—but then I thought about the scouting party coming across my strange footprints. I decided to walk alongside the path through the forest.

“If I can find water, I’d really like to take a bath...”

I’d escaped from the ruins, but now there was so much more to handle. I’d made some strange habits that I now had to shake—first and foremost, talking to myself.

“Status Open.”

Too-ka Mimori

Level 1789

HP: +5367 MP: +59037

Attack: +5367 Defense: +5367 Vitality: +5367

Speed: +5367 Intelligence: +5367

Title: E-Class Hero

It’s still just my MP that’s ridiculously high.

I opened my skill screen and looked at the two skills that I’d leveled up in my last battle.

Paralyze: Level 3 / Mana cost: 10MP / Multiple target skill / Dispel at will / Dispel location: head

Poison: Level 3 / Mana cost: 10MP / Multiple target skill / Dispel at will / Non-lethal mode

More options had appeared next to the skills—both now read *Dispel at will*.

I’d never wanted to dispel my skills in the ruins, so I hadn’t even realized I didn’t have a way to do that.

I should test that out on some monsters next chance I get.

“Dispel location: head,” I read aloud.

So, I can keep them frozen except for their head? I’ll be able to talk to someone while they’re paralyzed.

“Non-lethal mode...”

Does it leave them at 1 HP like in an RPG? That might be useful, too...though I doubt it'll win me any friends.

“...”

If I can get it to work on her, that would be the perfect skill to use on that foul Goddess...

“I'll have to test out this new Poison effect soon.”

I closed my stat screen and pulled the cola bottle out of my leather pouch. There were only a few drops left of the first drink I'd received—I opened the bottle, gave a toast to my escape, then downed it in one. It was flat, but the deep, sweet flavor spread through my tired limbs.

“Ahhh...”

I kept the empty plastic bottle to store water if I found any. Then I kept walking, mind racing with everything I had to think about.

Slow down...one thing at a time. I suck at multitasking, so I've got to go through everything in order before I start checking things off.

“Okay, then...”

First, I should try to find a village. I need a place to rest—an inn or something if possible. Then I need to fix my clothes and get rid of this school uniform. The last thing I want to do right now is draw attention, so the uniform definitely has to go.

I want to know where I am, too...am I still in the Kingdom of Alion, or was I sent somewhere else entirely? I wish I had a map.

I patted the reassuring weight of the pouch of silver coins and gemstones that I'd found.

Next, I need to find out how much this currency's worth. I've got to know how much things cost in this world.

The Goddess's explanations had been light on details, so there was a lot I'd have to figure out for myself.

“These, too...”

I glanced back at the Scrolls of Forbidden Magic sticking out of the pouch on my back.

I want to learn more about these things. They might help me defeat that Goddess, after all...

“I wonder...”

Is it even possible for me to cast these myself if I learn how to read the language? Or can only specific people learn how to do that stuff? I'll need to test that. Also...

“Wish I had a sword,” I muttered to myself. Though with all my stats besides MP as weak as they were, it might not do me any good.

I thought back to my journey through the ruins.

After a while, I'd stopped feeling tired or sick, and I didn't run out of stamina. I'd feel fine walking for what seemed like hours, and the leather pouch on my back seemed lighter and lighter as time went on, even as I picked up more things.

My stat modifiers must be working somewhat, but the Soul Eater still saw me as weak. Even past level 1000, I was still the weakest thing down there...? I guess I'm more of a caster, though—the kind of character who stays at the edge of their spell's range and behind the beefy warriors.

That made me wish for a sword even more. Or, even better...

“What I really need is a bodyguard to watch my back.”

If I had a strong fighter on my side to be my shield, I could fire off my skills without having to worry so much.

In the ruins, I'd done well keeping my back to the wall and letting my enemies clump up and block each other, but out in the open that wouldn't be so easy. Maybe I could hire a skilled mercenary to take on the Goddess with me.

“Or form my own mercenary band...”

I should have two or three different plans for how to carry out my revenge. This forbidden magic stuff is promising, but I don't know enough to count on it...better to have options.

“This would be so much easier if my status effect skills worked on that foul Goddess. But...I guess I've had more than my share of good luck recently.” Between the leather pouch that brought me food and the unexpected usefulness of my status effects, I'd been incredibly lucky so far.

Last, I want to take some time to read through this Forbidden Arts: The Complete Works book that the Great Sage gave me...

I sensed a presence. I shifted and peeked out from behind a tree.

“Squee!”

“Squee?!”

“Sque-ue-uee-!”

“Squee—!”

There were six blue, round, jelly-like things nearby.

“Are those...slimes?”

Slimes were a staple of RPGs, generally the first monsters that new adventurers fought. They were usually weak.

I don't think these guys are any different...they don't seem to be hiding special powers or anything.

Seems like the monsters in the Ruins of Disposal were as overpowered as I'd thought.

“Those slimes don't have gold eyes, either...”

All the monsters I'd faced had a golden flash in their eyes, even the weird horse-plant hybrid. The only exceptions were the zombie dragons...but they didn't have eyes to begin with.

The slimes seemed preoccupied and didn't notice my approach.

“Squee!”

“Squ-ee... ee...!”

“Quee?!”

“Quee! Squeue...”

They were fighting amongst themselves.

No, wait...I think they're ganging up on that one...

The smallest of the bunch was in the center, surrounded by five larger slimes that took turns attacking it. It looked scared, twitching back with every blow like it wanted to run.

I stayed to watch. It didn't look like the bigger slimes were messing around, and the little slime squashed itself down into the ground like it was bowing its head in apology to the others.

“That's never gonna work,” I found myself muttering.

There's nothing wrong with asking for help sometimes...but chances are, it'll never come. So, fight. Rely on your own strength before anyone else's.

“Squ-eee... ee...”

The smaller slime’s color was fading to pale grey.

Are those big slimes going to kill this little guy, just like that?

It was tough to tell what they were feeling—they didn’t have the intensely murderous feeling that I’d sensed from the monsters in the ruins.

Is it harder to read them because they’re so weak? I can’t tell what they’re feeling at all.

“Squeeeeeeee!!”

The flattened slime leaped up into the air with a cry.

The slimes below crashed into each other with a series of thuds. A moment later they regrouped and, hardening parts of their bodies to use as weapons, charged in for an attack.

“Squeeee! Squeee—!”

“Quee! Squ-?!”

The little one’s surprise attack was all for nothing, though. It couldn’t handle five-on-one odds.

“Squee! Squeee!”

“Quee?! Queee?!”

It had no chance of winning.

“Okay, that’s enough for me.”

I stepped toward the slimes with my arm pointed toward them. I smiled.

“Paralyze.”

The attackers froze.

“Qu-Quee?!”

Their squeals grew higher in alarm and confusion.

“Poison.”

The five slimes instantly flushed purple.

A bubble popped up in the corner of my stat display—it said *Lethal*.

“So that’s how I change the setting, huh?”

I tapped over to *Non-lethal* and the screen made a clicking sound.

“Lucky I get to try this out so soon.”

The slimes looked terrified, but I didn’t sense any aggression from them—I think they were just scared of what I’d done to them.

“Squ-ue-ee...”

I looked down at the paralyzed slimes.

“Heh heh...sorry to break up your little game, but I don’t like watching the strong pick on the weak like that, especially in such an unfair fight. I just had to step in.”

I selected the yellow gauge on one of the slimes and tapped *Dispel*. A confirmation window appeared with a *yes / no* selection. I tapped *yes* and dispelled the paralysis and poison effects on the five slimes.

My smile faded.

“Scram.”

With a few pathetic squees, the weakened slimes slunk cautiously away into the grass.

Defeating them would’ve been simple—after my poison brought them to the verge of death, stepping on them probably would’ve finished them off.

“No point killing them if they don’t give good EXP...and who knows? They might be friends or family of this little guy.”

I knew well enough that some parents were capable of hurting or even killing their own children.

I turned back to the smallest slime, still paralyzed where I left it.

“I’m gonna let you move again, okay? After that, you can do whatever you want. I’m not gonna kill you or anything.”

I’d started talking to the slime without thinking much about it—the Soul Eater had seemed to understand me, after all. But really, I had no idea if the slime understood language.

I crouched down.

“Don’t take this the wrong way, little guy, but...”

“Squee?”

It doesn’t even look scared... Weird.

“Sorry I didn’t come save you sooner. You did good. Fighting against odds like that...it was impressive.”

“Squee...!”

“Don’t attack me as soon as I dispel you, okay?”

“Squee!”

Maybe it was just my imagination, but it seemed like the slime understood.

I dispelled the Paralyze effect.

“Squee! Squee! Squee!”

Hm? It’s changing color... Maybe it’s recovering from those attacks earlier?

I stood up.

“See you. Stay strong out there, buddy.”

I slung my leather pouch back over my shoulder and turned to walk away. I had managed to test out my skill’s new feature—that was the main victory—but the encounter also made me feel a little better about everything.

I’d been walking away from the slime encounter for a while when I heard rustling in the bushes. Something was following me.

I turned around and sighed.

I knew it.

The little slime emerged from the bush, covered in leaves and branches. I scratched my head.

“Don’t you have friends to go back to? Those jerks can’t be your only friends, right?”

“Squeee...”

The slime flattened a little, like it was hanging its head.

I turned and kept walking. After a little while, I stopped and looked back.

“Squee...”

Aw, man...

“Just how long are you planning on following me?”

“Squee...?”

“*Can’t I come with you...?*” Maybe it was all the monsters I faced in the ruins, but I felt like I could understand what the slime was trying to say.

Well...it doesn’t seem aggressive the way those monsters were...and it doesn’t have golden eyes, or any of the creepy, gross features that those monsters did. Are there monsters in this world who aren’t dangerous...? I guess humans are like that—there are people like Kirihara and Oyamada, but also people like Sogou and Kashima.

“I don’t know if I could bring you into a town with lots of people, though...”

“Squuuuh...”

It seemed upset to hear that. That look stirred an old memory, and I remembered a time, long ago, when I took a cat that was lying sick in the street to get treated by a vet.

Yeah...Kashima Kobato came with me.

She took the cat in once it got better—my foster mother was allergic to cats, so I couldn’t take it. When I looked into the cat’s eyes as we left the vet, it looked so scared.

“*Thanks for saving me...*” it seemed to say, “*but what am I supposed to do now?*”

The cat hadn’t been wearing a collar—it must’ve been a stray. Now it was alone in the world, no other cats to watch its back. It had probably wandered alone for a long time before it got so weak it needed help. I felt an odd connection with the cat now, even more than I did back then.

Just like you and me, little buddy.

“You’re just like me...”

Alone, useless, ostracized...

“An outcast.”

When Kashima Kobato agreed to adopt the cat, I was so grateful

to her.

A few days later I went to say thank you, but she just awkwardly averted her eyes and walked away from me. I didn't think it was anything personal. Kashima always seemed so withdrawn and never talked to any of the guys in class. I think maybe she just didn't know how to respond to me.

In the end, I let it be.

Maybe she'll come up and talk to me again someday, you never know. As long as she doesn't hate me for some reason I don't know about...if that's it, then I guess we'll never be friends. But there's no need to hurry—you can't force a friendship. Better to let things grow over time.

My foster parents taught me that, and I'd always treasured their advice.

I sat under a tree chewing on katsu.

My leather pouch had finished its cooldown, so I decided to eat lunch. The little slime wobbled around next to me, looking quizzically at the rectangular packaging. It was a tonkatsu snack I'd eaten every so often in the old world—not bad.

Perfect crunch on the outside, a chewy, fishy center... and intensely flavored sauce coating the fried exterior. Soft and hard, salty and sweet—the flavors and textures conquered my senses and overwhelmed me.

It wasn't much, but it was satisfying. I washed it down with gulps of refreshing green tea.

“Ahh...”

Up here on the surface, it felt easier to eat and drink without worrying about how much was left. I looked at the last bite of katsu in the package.

“You want some?” I held it out to the slime. It stretched itself up a little in response.

“Sque-ee...?”

“Hm? Are you checking if it’s okay?”

The little slime flushed green—the sign for yes.

“Yeah, it’s all yours.”

It slowly stretched out a slimy tentacle and took the food from my hand. It absorbed it into its translucent body, and I saw it begin to melt inside.

Huh...so that’s how it eats?

“Squeee!!”

It turned a light pink—the color for happiness. It must’ve liked it.

I’d done a few tests with the slime before lunch to see if we could understand each other. It seemed quick to catch on to my intentions, even if it didn’t understand the words. And it could communicate with me, too. Green meant “yes,” red meant “no,” and pink meant “happy.” Those were the only three I’d figured out so far, but it was a good start.

Slimes were much more expressive creatures than I’d expected. Without a common language or even a face, I could still understand what the little guy was trying to say.

Maybe even better than I understood people, to be honest.

It just depends whether a monster would be let into a human settlement...

That problem resolved itself when the little slime showed me that it could stretch itself out into a thin rope. It crawled up and hid itself in my robes.

“As long as nobody in town can sense the presence of monsters, we should be fine.”

There was another advantage to having a slime hiding in my robes. As I stood, its slippery body crawled up my leg and poked out from my collar behind my head.

“Squee!”

“Can you watch behind me?”

“Squee!”

A slimy feeler reached around my head so I could see it. Its tip turned green for “yes.”

“All right...”

It's a temporary measure, but for now, it can watch my back.

"I was right to let you stay, buddy."

"Squee! ♪"

The slime climbed down, and I returned to sitting under the tree. There was something else I wanted to check before I got moving. I took *Forbidden Arts: The Complete Works* out of my pouch and opened it up. The slime poked out a feeler to look at what I was doing.

"I think it was somewhere around here..." I flipped through the book, looking for a page I remembered reading in the ruins.

"Here it is."

Monster enhancement solution—experimental

Test Results:

Created solution (rapid evolution).

Slimes → feasible.

First experiment: success.

Second experiment: success.

Third experiment: success.

Adverse results in monsters: possible increased hostility, unproven. Other effects?

The following pages were filled with scribbled notes.

"...on the contrary, slimes have proved brilliant partners compared to previous candidates. Their capacity for understanding and compassion is undeniable. And they're just so *cute*..."

Looks like the Great Sage found them useful in his experiments.

"Some kind of monster enhancement solution, huh...?"

I glanced at the little slime.

Maybe I could use this to make it more powerful.

"Are slimes even capable of leveling up...?"

That was one more thing to investigate, but the Great Sage had left me a hint. If he was researching a "monster enhancement solution,"

I had to assume that they had to rely on potions and spells to get stronger, not automatic leveling up like summoned heroes.

“But...if the wrong person got their hands on this research, who knows what would happen?”

I hummed and kept scanning the pages.

I can see why he called these “forbidden arts.”

I looked carefully at the detailed list of ingredients at the bottom of the page. There was also a list of places where they could be obtained—none of which I recognized, of course.

“While I’m looking for someone who can read those forbidden magic scrolls, I should see if I can pick up any of this stuff. Okay...ready to go?”

“Squee!”

“Hmm...”

I realized I didn’t have anything to call it. The little guy needed a name.

“Squee?”

Those squealing noises sound kind of like a piglet, and he’s also kinda round...

“Got it. Piggymaru.”

“Squee?”

“From now on, your name is Piggymaru. Well, unless you don’t like it—then we could change it, I guess...”

“Squee!”

Piggymaru turned green.

“Sque-ue-uee~! ♪”

Next it turned pink—I guess that meant it was happy with its new name. I put *Forbidden Arts: The Complete Works* back in my pouch. There was a lot of trash building up in there from all the convenience store food—I’d tried to keep the containers clean of food by wiping them off, at least, but it was still getting cluttered in there.

Lucky for me, the leather pouch and my *Forbidden Arts* book didn’t smell at all—did magic items magically stay clean, too? But I could still really use another pouch for trash, or just a place to dump it.

“Now, now. We don’t litter, all right? Put it in the bin.”

My foster mother’s words came back to me. I didn’t want to litter unless I really had to.

“I wonder how she’s doing...”

She’s too kind for her own good—that worries me more than anything else.

“She’s probably worrying about me right now...”

It was right after my real parents disappeared that I met my uncle and his wife for the first time—my new foster parents. That first day, my foster mother held me tight to her chest, her voice and hands trembling. I thought she was angry with me at first. My father’s hands had always shook when he was angry and drunk. My mother’s voice had always trembled when she screamed at me.

“I’m so sorry we didn’t see it sooner,” my foster mother whispered.

At first, I didn’t understand why she’d apologized. But when I eventually got it, I cried.

I was happy. People cry when they’re happy—not just when they’re sad.

It was the first time anyone had really shown me compassion.

I walked, Piggymaru wrapped around my neck, leather pouch on my back.

“Hey, Piggymaru.”

The slime appeared on my shoulder.

“Squee?”

“This whole thing I’m doing...it’s just about revenge. It’s a personal vendetta. That might not seem important...but it’s important

to me.”

Logically, I knew it was stupid to get so caught up in revenge. What did I really expect to come of it, once the dust settled?

Revenge is wrong, it's meaningless, it's a waste of your life. I'm sure a lot of people think that way—they'd look at me and my goals and think I'm pathetic.

But I'm going to do it anyway.

And if somebody asked me why...well, it's obvious to me. I'm doing this because...I want to. I won't stop until I get what I want—until I feel like this is over. Screw those self-righteous idiots, fighting for the masses, playing heroes and villains. We aren't even in the same story. For me, this all comes down to one thing—my ego.

There's a kind of justice to my revenge, though. Justice for me—not for anyone else. If anybody wants to join me on my journey, they'll have to be okay with that. I'll be upfront about it, give them all the info ahead of time. Whether they come with me or not will be up to them.

“I'm only doing this for my personal revenge—nothing more, nothing less. I'm basically an egomaniac. Are you really okay with that?”

“Squee!”

“If you want to leave, now's the time, little buddy. I won't hold it against you.”

“Squeee!”

Piggymaru's tentacle poked out from my robes and turned red, the signal for “no.”

“You really want to stick with me on a quest for vengeance?”

“Squee!”

The tentacle turned green—the signal for “yes.”

“All right, then.”

I gently patted the little tentacle and took my first step.

Two outcasts' journey for revenge.

“I'm counting on you, partner.”

“Squee!” came Piggymaru's happy reply as he turned a deeper shade of green.

We walked through the forest together, branches snapping underfoot.

They say nothing good can ever come from revenge. But that's fine. I don't want anything good. I don't need this revenge to come to anything at all.

In fact, I won't let it. I won't let this spiral out of control.

“Once I’m ready, I’m coming for you, and I won’t stop until you’re dead.”

And that's the end of it.

Foul Goddess...

“I will have my revenge.”

Chapter 6: A Chance Meeting

The Runaway

THE ELF'S IRREGULAR PANTING echoed softly through the quiet forest.

“Haah... Haah... Haah... Haah...!”

She ran headlong through the deep foliage, avoiding the roads. She'd started running full speed when she heard a twig snap somewhere nearby. The slim lines of her body made it easy to avoid snapping twigs or being snared by branches as she sprinted along.

“...”

She slowed her pace.

I think...I've lost them for the moment...?

She no longer felt like her pursuers were breathing down her neck, but she knew that they hadn't given up. This was just how they did things—they wanted to enjoy the hunt. They'd let you know they were following, then suddenly disappear. Once you thought you'd shaken them, they'd be back on your trail.

I shouldn't have bathed in the river earlier. I'm lucky they didn't ambush me there. If they had...

A shiver ran down her spine. Unfortunately, the ruins she'd stumbled upon were no help—she'd discovered what looked like an entrance but had no idea how to get inside. After leaving the ruins, she'd encountered the four hunters again and had to flee. And now, there was a different path presented to her.

Should I really keep running? Maybe it's time to fight.

She ducked behind a tree trunk and readied an attack. Her pursuers were of heroic blood, descendants of the Heroes from Another World who had once saved this world. The children of those heroes had talents and strength far surpassing the average warrior.

According to rumor, even with their great strength, the

descendants couldn't compare to the real heroes who'd fought against evil in times of old. Still, they were much more formidable than the enemies she normally had to face. The descendants of heroes lived in kingdoms all across the continent, and were an important part of the militaries of countries who couldn't summon heroes of their own.

Her mind raced as she hesitated on what to do next. She might've been able to take them in single combat, but all four at once...

She let out a tired sigh.

I don't think I can throw them off for good...so they leave me no choice. I'll have to equip my spirit armor.

It's time to put an end to this chase.

If she couldn't run, she would have to fight, even if the odds weren't in her favor. She called out to the spirits within her.

I summon you, armor of spirit... I dedicate myself to your service. Protect me, as I have sworn myself to you...

She silently mouthed the names of the spirits to herself.

Silfigzea, Ferillbanger, Willozega...

Three rays of light enveloped her body—the light green of the spirit of wind, the blue of the spirit of ice, and the pure white of the spirit of light.

When the lights faded, she was clad in armor, a sword at her side. A manifestation of the spirits' power, her spirit armor made her look like a holy knight from days of old—many had assumed her to be one in the past. She drew the sword at her hip and strengthened it with ice.

With a frozen *crack*, blue veins crawled up the blade.

She pulled down her helmet's visor.

All right...I'm ready.

Her visor covered both her eyes completely, but the wind told her where to go. Using her senses this way was extremely taxing, but it allowed her to read her opponents' movements and positions far more accurately than she could with sight alone. It gave her an impressive advantage in combat.

She lightly touched her fingertips to her eyelids.

Those four heroic-blooded bounty hunters—known to some as “The

White Walkers,” to others as “Holy Watchers”...

“Fang”—Zarash Finebird.

“The Demon Bizzare”—Ashura.

“Super Pressure”—Jiobain Sengai.

“The God Sword”—Maggots Playdin.

She let her hands drop. Her body and mind were both weary from long days on the run. She closed her eyes in the dark behind her visor.

I’ve heard the stories...there isn’t a mercenary out there who doesn’t know their reputation. They’re strong and dangerous.

Even in her limited run-ins with the four of them, she’d been able to tell that they were strong, but...she also got the impression that they weren’t yet using their full abilities. It felt like they were testing her, getting a feel for her abilities before moving in for real.

I can’t let them capture me...

If she kept running, she’d only tire herself out and be in worse shape to face them when the time came.

I have to fight them while I still have the strength.

She gripped the hilt of her sword with both hands.

I’ll cut them down right here...!

She waited silently for their approach, focusing her senses until they were sharp as a knife.

She wiped a bead of sweat from her immaculate white cheek.

Long moments passed.

They haven’t attacked yet...? They must be plotting something.

A chill ran down her spine like the blade of her icy sword had been pressed against it.

They’re finally getting serious. No more hide-and-seek, no more games...

Now, they’re ready to hunt.

She put a hand to her mouth. A strange uncertainty welled up inside her.

She felt sick—overwhelmed by inexplicable nausea. Her head spun. It was like her mind was twisting itself in knots.

Wh-what is this feeling?

She couldn't tell whether her pursuers were strong or weak, her understanding turning to dust.

Have the enemies I've been fighting always felt this...strange? Can I really stand up to them? Perhaps it was wrong to run from the beginning.

There was a rustling sound, and she jumped to attention. Gripping her sword tightly, she leaped toward the noise.

No! Wait...?!

It was a feint. She felt a presence in the brush behind her.

"Paralyze."

Wh-who is that? Not one of the four hunters...I don't feel that unbridled strength that I would from standing near them. It's strange...this person isn't nearly as strong as the bounty hunters, but...the spirits are afraid of them. I feel the presence of a monster, too...? N-no, no time to think about that now...

"I...I c-can't m...ove...? Wh-wh...at is...th-this...?!" She strained to speak against the strange heaviness that had overtaken her.

"Hunh. You tried to attack me, but...there's something different about you. I don't think you *actually* wanted to kill me."

It was a boy's voice.

What is he talking about?

"You don't seem like those four guys I just met. I thought maybe we could talk. I stopped you from moving for now—just some insurance on my end."

"Wh...at d-do you...wan...t fr...om...me...?" she croaked, struggling with every word.

"Well, to be honest, I'm kinda lost. If you know the area, I'd like to be directed to the nearest town. Also, I'm not from around here, and there's a lot I don't know. I want as much information as you can give me."

Her mind froze.

He isn't lying...?

The spirit of wind, which could detect truth and falsehood, told her that his statement was mostly true. From the way the spirit was

acting, it seemed confident in its reading, too. He didn't seem to want to hurt her.

Is he really just lost, or...?

And there was one other detail that gripped her thoughts.

"Those four guys I just met..."

I can't feel the presence of the bounty hunters anywhere in the forest.

Where did they go? What happened to the White Walkers?

Mimori Touka

I WALKED THROUGH THE FOREST, taking care not to lose sight of the road. After a while, I reached a crossroads that wasn't marked in any way as far as I could see.

What do I do now?

I was about to ask Piggymaru when I felt a presence close at hand. Since my time in the ruins, my sense for the location and strength of enemies had been heightened.

"What the hell? That's not her!"

Four men appeared from the trees wearing typical fantasy-style armor, though it was a long way from the clean, polished stuff you'd see on TV. All four were armed, and it sounded like they were looking for someone—someone who wasn't me, luckily. I had a bad feeling about them, though. They clearly weren't searching for a lost child out of the goodness of their hearts. One man, marked with a scar on his face, looked at me disdainfully.

"Just some filthy little kid. Disgusting," he said.

"What should we do with him, Zarash?" asked another.

"Leave him, he isn't worth our time. What is he, a fledgling mercenary, maybe? I don't know what he's doing here, and I don't care."

The man with the scar was acting like their leader—he reminded me of Kirihaara. One of the other men, who looked kinda like a shark, looked me up and down.

"Them robes look old, but not bad cloth, eh? Dirty as muck, though."

"So just give us your money and scram, got it? And we won't strip you naked and make you piss up a tree like a dog this time. We're in a rush," said another of the men, pointing his greatsword in my direction.

"No. We kill him."

A thin man stepped forward. In his hands, he toyed with a curved knife.

“You want us to waste our time killing this worm?”

The thin man stroked his fingertips with the curved blade.

“I haven’t tried this new blade out on a living person yet... This trash meat will do. I mean, just look at him! It’s like he’s begging for us to kill him.”

“Hurry up and do it then, Maggots. We’ve got bigger fish to fry. Our prey should be tiring soon—we’re almost at the finish line.”

“Heh, it’s no fun toying with the boys before I kill ’em, so let’s get back to our *real* prey. Hey! When we get our fee for capturing that girl, let’s go get some Ablom prostitutes!”

“No way. I’m tired of the ones that know what they’re doing—that place is expensive, too. Let’s just stop by the nearest city, grab some pretty girls off the street, and keep ’em to ourselves for six months, man!”

“Six months?! No girl could stand six months of you going at ’em!”

“Shut the hell up! If they can’t handle me, that’s their fault! I want to get my hands on this one we’re chasing... Not many girls around that are worth all this trouble!”

“One look at her and I could barely control myself! No city girl could compare to that thing~!”

The man with the scar looked off into the trees.

“Even we can’t touch this one, though...not when our client is...” he gave them a significant look.

“Ugh, yeah, you’re right.”

“Anyway...”

The man with the curved knife took a step towards me.

“Whatcha doin’, kid? Think you can sneak away from us, shaking like that? Where are you gonna go?”

I’d begun inching backwards as soon as the men started talking. I held my hand out in front of me as if in protest.

“Please...I-let me go... I don’t want to die...”

The man shot me a sadistic grin.

“Sorry, kid~! I’m gonna cut you into little pieces nice and quick,

then we've gotta get on with the job, okay~? 》”

The man's muscles tensed; then he lunged forward with his knife in hand.

“Die!”

I had the distance—everyone was in range.

“Nobody gets away from Maggots-samaaaa!!”

“Paralyze.”

“Aaa?! Ahh... Nh...?!”

“Can't... m-move...?”

All four men stood motionless in front of me.

They all seemed like the usual self-important worthless scum, but they also seemed fairly competent. That's why I decided to get a good distance on them before using my unique skills.

They seem way less threatening than anything from the ruins, though...

“Good. Status effect skills work on human targets, too.”

So far, the success rate is still 100%.

“Maybe that foul Goddess really is the only one who's immune to my abilities...”

“N-no way...”

“Hm?”

The man with the scar was trying to speak.

“S-status...effects...? Y-you aren't...even...using...a m-ma...gic... item...” he wheezed.

Hmm. So they can talk a little even while they're paralyzed, huh? I couldn't tell when I was fighting monsters—it was hard to tell just how paralyzed my enemies were.

“A-all...four...at once...? C-can't be...lieve...”

The Goddess had told me that status effect skills are famously worthless. I guess she'd been telling me the truth. I smiled.

“Guess I pulled the short straw, huh?”

“Wh-what...?”

“Forget it. You tried to kill me, and none of your friends even tried to stop you. Thanks for making this easy for me.”

The four men still didn’t understand.

“Poison.”

“Aah?! Aaah!”

“I-it...burns...”

“Who...who the...h-hell...are...”

The men turned purple and began to moan in agony.

“Squee!” Piggymaru poked out from the neck of my robes and perched on my shoulder.

“Piggymaru? Are you mad at them...?”

“Squee!”

It seemed that Piggymaru felt the same way about these four that I did.

“Doesn’t matter to me if they die. Might be a relief to watch them go.”

There was something black and evil within the four men—something I saw in Kirihara and Oyamada, too.

I’ll answer murder with murder, evil with evil. Those are the rules you play by, aren’t they?

“If I don’t kill them, they’ll kill me.”

I stared at the palm of my hand.

No need to hesitate. No fear. No worry.

“I can kill them. I can kill people.”

I waited for the men to die, watching their eyes roll and their faces contort with pain. Paralyzed from head to toe, they could barely even writhe.

They begged for help in the end. I seriously doubted that they ever showed mercy to their victims’ similar pleas.

I ignored them.

“Nngh...”

At long last, they all lay dead before me.

I didn't level up.

Did they just give really low EXP, or...

"Do humans not give EXP at all?" I wondered aloud as I started to ransack their corpses.

Their clothes were all too big for me, and I didn't want anyone to recognize them while I was wearing them around town—that could get me in a lot of trouble. Same went for the weapons—it'd be too dangerous to walk around with a stolen sword. I decided to stick to their money, and put several purses stuffed with gold, silver, and bronze into my leather pouch. Money was untraceable, after all. Much safer to steal.

Done with the mercenaries, I stood up and dusted myself off.

"Squeeee!"

Piggymaru let out a strange squeaking noise.

"Oh, you feel it too. I know..."

I could've taken my time killing the men slowly with the non-lethal poison setting, but I'd been distracted. There was another presence nearby—someone powerful. Someone ready to fight and kill. I ducked low and made my way toward them.

I don't know yet if this person's going to be my enemy, but after everything those mercenaries said, I have a pretty good idea who it's going to be.

"What the hell? That's not her!"

"Even we can't touch this one, though...not when our client is..."

It must be the girl they were chasing.

"It's strange, though...her presence is so strong and clear." It hit me like a wave, honest and true, like she was challenging the whole forest to battle.

She must've been planning to take them head on, otherwise she'd be hiding and planning an ambush. She's either really confident in her abilities, or too noble to hide.

I picked up a thick branch and threw it off into the bushes.

"Squee!"

Piggymaru's tentacle twitched to the right.

So that's where she's hiding...

She was fast, like a strong wind racing through the trees. I stood up from the brush and pointed my arm squarely at her back. She noticed me just a fraction of a second too late.

“Paralyze.”

She stopped dead in her tracks—not that she had a choice. She seemed confused about why she wasn't moving.

Well, I can tell from the shape of her body that she's definitely a girl. She's wearing a weird hood...or one of those things that nuns wear. A veil, I think?

The veil was connected to a cape that hung down her back, a bit like a hoodie. The next thing that caught my attention was her armor. It looked like a dress, white and accented with blue and green lines.

Her hair was a pale blonde under the veil. Her body looked slim and delicate. She struggled against the paralysis, trying to speak.

“Huh. You tried to attack me, but...there's something different about you. I don't think you *actually* wanted to kill me.”

I'd felt a change come over her as she charged at me—hesitation, almost. She wasn't going to kill me out of some sadistic pleasure like most of the monsters and humans I'd met lately.

“You don't seem like those four guys I just met. I thought maybe we could talk. I stopped you from moving for now—just some insurance on my end.”

Doesn't change the fact that she's dangerous. I had to strike first, or she would've cut me down. The only way I can survive is by manipulating things in my favor.

“Wh...at d-do you...wan...t fr...om...me...?” she asked with some difficulty.

No sense lying about that, I guess.

“Well, to be honest, I'm kinda lost. If you know the area, I'd like to be directed to the nearest town. Also, I'm not from around here, and there's a lot I don't know. I want as much information as you can give me,” I replied.

I could sense her confusion from my response.

I carefully walked closer to get a better view of her face.

“A blindfold...?”

Is that part of her armor?

Her vision was completely obscured, like she was wearing an eye mask. I looked at her face, and was drawn in by her incredibly white skin. Her face was small, and her jaw came to a graceful point at her chin. Her glossy, thin lips quivered a little as I approached.

“Th...the other...four...?” she stammered.

“Friends of yours?”

“N... No...”

“...”

This is just getting annoying, talking to people while they're paralyzed. There's still time left, so...

“I'm gonna make it easier for you to talk. But make any moves and I'll freeze you again. I have things that can hurt you, too. So don't try anything, okay?”



That was a bit of a bluff—I can't stack one paralyze on top of another. But I'm not exactly lying. If she tries anything, I'll put her under with sleep, but I can't exactly ask her questions if she's out cold. I'd like to avoid that if I can.

Piggymaru was quiet—almost like it was holding its breath to avoid being heard. I was impressed. Slimes were much smarter than I'd given them credit for.

After a time, the girl responded.

“O...kay...”

I put a little more distance between us, then tapped the *Dispel Location: Head* setting on the panel. There was also a drop-down list of other body parts to choose from.

“I... I can talk again...” she said with a blank expression.

“Only move your mouth, okay? Sorry to be so blunt, but I don't trust you. I've been through too much to get here, and I can't take any chances.”

“I understand. You're right not to trust strangers. Any experienced traveler would do the same,” she replied.

She didn't start panicking or screaming. She has more sense than that.

Her voice was clear, and her expression made it obvious how strong her will was. She looked almost like a pure, righteous knight come to life. I checked the yellow paralysis gauge and realized something.

I think I'm the only one who can see this gauge counting down...which means I might be able to trick my opponents into thinking it'll last forever.

“First, I'd like to ask you a question, if you'll permit me,” the knight said.

“That depends on the question.”

“Did you meet a group of four men on the road?”

“I did.”

“What happened to them?”

“I killed them.”

“What? Y-you...”

“Something wrong? They seemed like worthless trash to me. And they were chasing you, weren’t they?”

“Oh...yes. They were indeed my pursuers...and there’s nothing wrong. I just...” she stopped and seemed to be sizing me up. “Do you mean to tell me that you defeated them single-handedly? Or do you have allies nearby?”

“Just one. But I’m not planning on revealing my ally to you.”

That wasn’t a lie, either—my ally just happened to be hiding in my robes.

It’s smart to keep this knight on her guard, let her think I have friends around. It sounds like she isn’t a friend of those four from earlier, which is good—I doubt I’d win her over if I murdered her friends. But I still don’t trust her...she’s wearing that blindfold, after all. It’s hiding her expression from me—it might be making it easier for her to lie. Is she using it to trick me?

The blindfold slid upwards onto her forehead.

That timing—it’s like she read my mind!

I gazed at the girl’s full face for the first time.

With the blindfold pushed aside, there was no mistaking her beauty. Her eyebrows were shapely and elegant, but it was her pale blue eyes that made me stop and stare.

I’ve never seen eyes this clear before.

There was something mystical about her appearance, far removed from any human I’d ever seen. She almost looked like an elf from stories—they’d always been drawn as fine, slim, and attractive in things I’d read. But the most obvious feature common to elves was missing—I could make out human ears beneath the veil.

“Thank you for answering my question,” she said. “And I apologize for my abruptness. I did not detect any falsehood when you told me you defeated my pursuers. Thank you for answering me truthfully.”

Does she have a lie detector or something? Sounds like she’s real confident I was telling the truth.

She looked at me as sincerely as someone taking an oath in court—I was sure she’d have her hand on her heart if she’d been able to

move it there.

“I pledge to answer your questions truthfully, and to the best of my ability. For defeating those four mercenaries, I owe you my life.”

She owes me her life? That's big, but...no point in just being owed a favor, I've gotta call it in.

“What would you like to know? I believe you said you're not from around here,” she said, formal and dignified even in her current predicament. Maybe that meant she wasn't quite so suspicious of me.

“Not from around here, no. I travelled all over before I ended up here.”

“What brought you here in the first place?”

“I was abandoned, I guess you could say.”

“I see... I'm sorry for being so forward.”

Abandoned... The word probably evoked all kinds of dark images in her mind. Was I ditched by my traveling companions? Forced off my land? Sold into slavery?

But...it wasn't a lie. It was the story of my life. I'd been abandoned by my parents, discarded by that foul Goddess. And...it didn't hurt that hinting at a dark past might make her think twice about asking me personal questions. Concealing the details of my life was just smart. I looked her in the eyes, and she looked back, questions in her gaze that she wasn't actually asking.

“Is something wrong?”

“You don't seem like a bad person...as far as I can tell,” I confessed.

“Have I won a little of your trust, perhaps?”

“Only a little. I have my reasons to be secretive, just like you. I think it's in both of our best interests not to pry too deeply.”

I can sense that she has something to hide, too. But that's fine with me—she can keep her secrets, I just need some basic info and to get away safe.

“I agree,” she said, a shadow falling over her face. “That suits me as well.”

There wasn't much left on the paralysis gauge—I didn't have time to chat.

“Are there any towns or settlements near here?”

“The small city of Mils is nearby. I was actually heading there myself—”

She caught herself and stopped mid-sentence. Apparently she didn’t want to tell me where she was going—afraid I might leak information to her enemies, maybe. In any case, the secret was out. Lucky for her I didn’t really care.

The girl told me the general direction and how long it’d take on foot—Mils wasn’t far.

I might be able to sleep in a real bed tonight...

“What country is this?”

“You don’t know what country you’re in?”

“It’s a long story—I’ve been living under a rock. Answer the question, will you?” I answered, trying to dodge her suspicions.

“Well...we’re in the southern part of the Kingdom of Ulza right now—this area is known as the Dark Forest.”

Wow. This isn’t even Alion? I just assumed the Ruins of Disposal were there, but...this is useful information.

“Where is the Kingdom of Alion from here?” I asked.

“Alion? That’s north of Ulza. Keep going southeast from here and you’ll reach...” She hesitated a moment, “the Bakoss Empire.”

There was something she wasn’t saying, but I didn’t push any further.

At least I’m far away from that foul Goddess for now. If this is a whole different country, I shouldn’t be in immediate danger from her.

“All right, this next question’s going to sound a little weird.”

The girl looked taken aback, but remembered she was a captive audience.

“Ah. Right. Go ahead.”

“So...how much would it cost for a person to buy some bread around here?”

“You don’t know that...?”

“I’ve been living under a rock, like I said. I don’t know what

things cost here.”

“I see...I’d say that no matter where you are, a slice of bread won’t cost more than one silver coin.”

Good to know they actually have bread in this world.

“How many bronze coins are in a silver?”

“Thirty.”

Let’s say a slice of bread costs 100 yen. That’d make a silver piece worth 3000 yen? That gives me a rough idea, I guess, but I can’t expect things here to cost the same as back in Japan...I can’t think in yen anymore. The price of bread is a good start, though—everything else can wait until I make it to Mils.

I continued asking questions as the yellow gauge ticked down, until finally, there was only one more important thing to ask.

I took the forbidden magic scrolls out of my pouch and held them up so the girl could see them.

“Can you read these?”

Her glassy eyes scanned the parchment.

Has she realized she can move her whole head?

I couldn’t tell for sure. Now that I was closer, I could see dark rings under her eyes...

Long days on the run, never getting enough sleep?

She wrinkled her brow.

“This looks like an ancient language...a rare one, at that.”

“Can you read it?”

“Unfortunately, no.”

“All right.”

I rolled up the scrolls and put them back in my pouch.

Guess it won’t be that easy—I’d hoped for a clue at least, but I’ll have to keep looking.

“Although...”

“Hm?”

“I might know of someone who can.”

“Really? Why do you think that?”

“She was once known as the Forbidden Witch—you haven’t heard that name before?”

“No.”

A witch, huh?

“The last I heard of her, though, she’d been driven from her home by commoners suspicious of her vast forbidden knowledge.”

Guess that’s why it’s forbidden. Well, even if it’s just a guess based on a rumor, at least I have a lead.

“What if I wanted to meet with this witch? Where would I find her?”

“Do you know of the Great Ruins?”

“First I’ve heard of them.”

“It’s rumored that she’s living somewhere in that area.”

“You don’t know for sure?”

“I’m sorry—all I have are rumors.”

“Is it far from here?”

“Keep heading north and you’ll find it in time, but...” She hesitated again. “I believe reaching her will be very difficult.”

“Why do you say that?”

“The area surrounding the Great Ruins is known as the Land of the Golden-Eyed Monsters.”

There was a lot I didn’t understand about what she was telling me, but I couldn’t be too surprised—I barely knew anything about this world, so there was just too much to process all at once.

When I have a little time, I need to sit down and get a handle on all this.

“So, I’m guessing it’s a breeding ground for monsters?”

“That’s correct—it’s a dangerous zone that occupies much of the center of the continent.”

“Huh.”

Sounds like everybody on the continent knows about the danger waiting there...making it the perfect hiding place for the witch.

“Thank you for the information. I’m grateful.”

I looked at the gauge—there were only a few minutes left.

I think I can trust her, but...it’s always possible she’ll attack me the moment this effect wears off. Even that foul Goddess seemed friendly enough at first.

Time to go.

“Is there anything else?”

“No. I’m done.”

She forced a laugh.

“I don’t suppose this makes us even, does it...? This is hardly enough to repay you for saving my life—”

“No.”

“Hm?”

“We’re even. The information you’ve given me is more than enough to repay that debt.”

Learning all this before I get to town is a blessing.

“Now we’re going to go our separate ways—understand?”

“Y-yes. If that’s your decision, of course.”

She seemed to feel obliged to do more, too honorable for her own good.

It must be hard to live like that—worrying so much about other people.

She reminded me of my foster mother, who spent so much of her time caring for others that it made me worry about her. My foster mother was the best model I could think of for what a good person is like.

“See you.”

“Excuse me, but...this movement-restraining technique...”

“It’ll wear off in a few minutes. I can’t guarantee your safety during that time, though.”

I said “skill” earlier, but she used the term “technique”...

“I understand. It will be dispelled soon, then,” she replied. I was almost positive she had some kind of lie-detecting ability.

“Thanks for answering my questions so quickly.”

“You did seem to be in a rush.”

She must’ve noticed that I was keeping an eye on the gauge...

“Well, thank you.”

“I owe you my life.”

“You’re not so bad. Might seem ironic given that I just ambushed you in the forest, but...I hope you have a safe journey.”

I turned and walked away.

After a while, Piggymaru squelched out from my robes with a “Squee!”.

“Hm?”

“Squee?”

“You want to know why I let her go?”

“Squee.”

Piggymaru turned green.

“She didn’t seem like she wanted to hurt me, and she answered all my questions. There’s no point attacking someone who doesn’t want to hurt or kill you—I don’t want to slaughter people for no reason. I have a code, y’know?”

“Squee-squee...”

Piggymaru’s tentacle bobbed up and down in agreement.

“But that girl might still come after us once she can move. I’m counting on you to watch my back, partner.”

Piggymaru shot to attention, turning bright green in response.

“Squee!”

She seemed sweet. What was I supposed to do? If she’d reminded me of my real parents, I would’ve killed her with no hesitation, but...she reminded me so strongly of my foster parents, I had to stop and talk.

“I guess that’s another rule of mine, then...”

Every rule has exceptions, though.

As I made my way through the forest, I stumbled upon a spring of clear water in my path.

"All right, Piggymaru. I'm just gonna clean myself up a little. Keep a lookout, okay?"

I stared down at my own face reflected in the clean water.

I look terrible...

"Little brat, always got that sad, nasty look in your eyes!"

I remembered my real father's words.

Maybe I don't look terrible...maybe this is just what I look like.

I scooped up some of the water in my hands.

I don't want to drink this stuff, but I should take some of it with me. It might be useful later.

I filled my old cola bottle. Then I stripped, folding my clothes and placing them on the water's edge. Taking the rag I'd made by ripping up my uniform, I stepped into the spring. The temperature was mercifully warm, the sunlight-dappled leaves rustling in the light breeze.

Finally, a chance to get clean.

I felt my stiff muscles relax as the water washed over them, and then...

Leaves crunched on the forest floor. My shoulders tensed. I quickly lifted an arm in the direction of the sound.

"Ah—"

"It's just you..."

The golden-haired girl from earlier stood frozen, looking over at me through the brush. I couldn't see the armor or sword from earlier—just a pouch slung over her shoulder.

Can all that armor really fit in there...? She wouldn't have thrown it away, right?

I must've been staring—the girl looked away.

"Sorry for disturbing you."

She bowed.

"Did you want to use the spring? I'll leave as soon as I'm dry."

"No, it's fine. Take your time," she said, turning on her heels and disappearing once more into the forest.

I returned to washing myself with the rag, the water cool and refreshing on my back.

“Sq... Squee...”

A flattened Piggymaru squelched out of the bushes and slumped towards me.

“Hmm? What’s wrong, buddy?”

“Squeeee...”

Is Piggymaru upset about something?

“Don’t tell me... You feel bad because you couldn’t hear that girl coming?”

“Squee...”

Piggymaru turned green. I crouched down and stretched out my hand.

“Squee...”

Piggymaru quivered softly, expecting to be poked in punishment. I reached out and stroked the little slime.

“Squee?”

“Don’t worry about it. You did your best, right?”

“Squee! Squee!”

Why didn’t Piggymaru see her coming, though?

I looked off in the direction she’d gone.

Sure, he might’ve let his guard down a little, but... I didn’t even hear her until it was too late. Piggymaru’s way more sensitive to movements and sounds than I am, but even on guard she slipped right by. There’s something about her...

“I think she must have some technique for hiding her presence—no wonder you couldn’t sense her coming.”

That would explain why those four mercenaries spent so long tracking her, too. They must’ve been skilled bounty hunters.

“Squee, Squee, Squee,” Piggymaru apologized desperately.

“I said don’t worry about it! I wouldn’t abandon my partner over something like this!”

Piggymaru turned pink and rolled over to rub against my feet.

“Squee~! Squee~! ♪”

I laughed.

It seems happy now, at least.

“All right. Onward to Mils.”

The Runaway

WHO IN THE WORLD was that boy...?

She couldn't stop thinking about him as she came to the gates outside the city of Mils. Of stumbling upon him in the forest after their first encounter...and his naked body.

It might've been the first time she'd gotten such a good look at a naked boy. She'd never even seen her father naked before. Her cheeks grew hot and flushed as she tried to clear the thought of him from her mind.

Still, I can't believe my luck. For the White Walkers to be defeated by chance, by a stranger...

Defeating those four couldn't have been easy for her savior, though from the way he talked it didn't seem that it had been too difficult, either.

Did he use that strange technique, perhaps...?

She prided herself on knowing about these things, but a skill that could restrain someone like that...? She had no idea what had happened to her.

Was it a kind of status effect technique? No...impossible. They're famous for their low success rates—it's unthinkable that he could've cast such a technique on five targets without failing once. And it lasted far too long.

Was it an incantation of some sort...perhaps one I've never encountered before? He might've used some poison to paralyze me, but...he was able to dispel part of it in an instant. It must be magic of some kind...

She snapped back to attention after letting her mind wander too far.

No. I must focus on my own situation. First, I need money to continue my journey.

She'd heard a rumor that there were ways to make quick money in Mils, if you played your cards right.

I'll need to gather information, I suppose.

There were no longer pursuers on her tail, and nobody in Mils knew who she was, but...complacency could get her killed.

“...”

Next time I let my disguise drop, I can't take any chances.

She took a deep breath and set out to look for information. News of the lucrative opportunities in Mils had certainly spread to other towns by now. She knew where she could find the information she needed—the Mercenaries' Guild.

The Mercenaries' Guild building was marked with a carved wooden sign depicting a scroll of parchment. She stepped into the bustling hall and several heads turned in her direction. Female mercenaries were rare—they often attracted the wrong kind of attention. She concealed her fear under her human disguise.

I'm not from around here—I'm sure that's the only reason they're looking at me...

She ignored the onlookers and walked through the hall to the noticeboard at the far end. This was where they posted the quests that guild members could undertake. She scanned the board until her eyes settled on the largest poster.

It appears that I arrived just in time. If this goes well, I'll be set for travel expenses for quite a while...as soon as I earn enough, I need to get out of Mils.

All right, time to find lodging for the night—

As she began to leave, another poster caught her eye. One of the mercenaries began talking loudly behind her.

“Whoa, would you look at that bounty?!”

“I see it...”

“They say she was a high elf princess, y'know? Then she ran off to be a knight in some foreign kingdom, somethin' like that.” The mercenary rubbed his chin. She listened intently.

“She's an experienced fighter...and an unbelievable beauty to boot! You hear about her? Word is they didn't even have to pretty up this face when they were making the poster!”

It's a bounty—of course it has to look like the target.

“Heh heh... What would you do if a beauty like this one fell in your lap?” the mercenary asked with a sneer. “None of the roughnecks around here would hand her in without having a little fun with her first.”

The mercenary looked at her closer now, his head scanning her from head to toe.

“Hey, you ain’t so bad yourself! Not quite on the level of a princess, but not bad!”

Apparently this had been his intention all along.

“How ’bout it? Want some company?”

She turned and walked away without a word. The mercenary gave a bitter laugh.

“Didn’t like being compared to royalty, huh?”

“...”

She turned back for a moment and looked at the poster. The bounty was high, but she wouldn’t be able to claim it. She looked at the name printed in block letters beneath the portrait.

Seras Ashrain.

Without a word, Seras Ashrain walked out of the crowded hall.



Afterword

APOLOGIES FOR THE LONG TITLE—this is Kaoru Shinozaki.

The “Status Effect Skills” I mention throughout this book are an important part of the story, but personally what I’d really like you to focus on are the characters themselves. My goal is to create a story and a world in which my characters can grow and shine in their own ways, and I hope that you fall for them.

I want to thank my editor, O-sama, who put so much passion into this work, and KWKM-sama, who drew the illustrations. Every time he sent me a new picture, it helped me build a stronger image of these characters in my mind, and it was an honor to have him agree to illustrate this volume. Thank you to everyone who has read and followed this work online—your support is what helped us bring it to print. Thank you very much for reading my book—I hope more than anything that it has been a happy experience for you.

—Kaoru Shinozaki



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